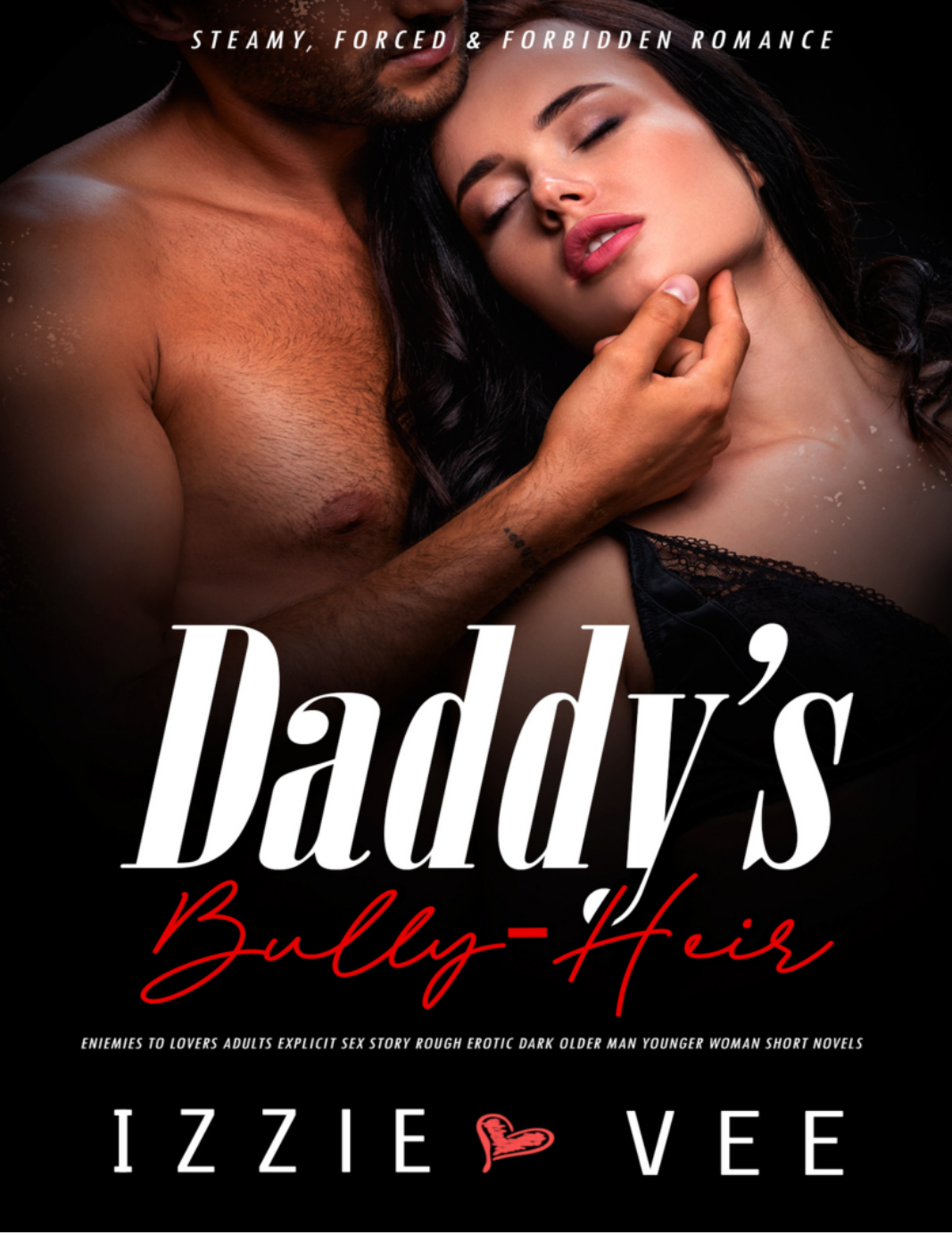
STEAMY, FORCED & FORBIDDEN ROMANCE
Daddy's
Bully-Heir
ENIEMIES TO LOVERS ADULTS EXPLICIT SEX STORY ROUGH EROTIC DARK OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN SHORT NOVELS
IZZIE VEE

Daddy's Bully-Heir

Rough Taboo Age-Gap Older Daddy Younger Woman Short Novels

Steamy, Forced & Forbidden Romance

IZZIE VEE

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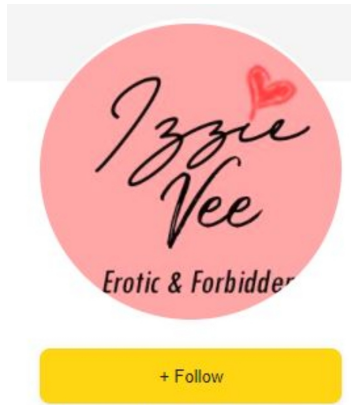

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Chapter 1

Anna

I could feel my eyes watering as I listened to what the person was saying on the other end. I couldn't believe this was happening, but it was, and every detail thrummed through my head like a nasty headache.

"Mr. Nash has left his cabin and requested in his will that you are to scatter his ashes at his favorite place – I'm assuming you know where that is?"

My foggy eyes traced the room for a second as my brain raced to understand what he was saying. "Y-yeah."

"Again, I'm very sorry for your loss, Miss Cambridge; we'll be in touch." The line went dead, and I stood frozen on the sofa, feeling a warm trail of wetness slide down my face.

My best friend Maria came up to me, immediately lacing her hands around my shoulders as she pulled me in to give me comfort. She didn't know what it was; she was just there, collecting all my tears on her shoulders as I sobbed against her. Memories that seemed distant came crashing back, making this even more overwhelming. Those memories had been buried – dormant – for a very long time, but one phone call erupted it all.

"Anna, what's happening?" Maria asked, her tone soft, the expression on her face pained as she pulled back to look at me.

"Everything is just falling apart," I choked, attempting to wipe my face with the back of my hand, but only more tears came.

"Hey, Hey… you can talk to me, y'know." Her hand moved to my face as she used her thumb to caress my cheeks and wipe at the fallen tears.

I sniffed, trying to find the courage to do just that, but my heart felt like it was about to burst in my chest with the sorrow that currently took claim of me.

"Remember I always told you about Patrick Nash when I came here and how he was basically the closest thing to a family I had growing up?"

Maria nodded immediately. "He's gone," I choked out.

Maria's blue eyes glistened. "Oh, Anna, I'm so sorry."

I nodded, fighting back the tears. “Nobody bothered to call me and tell me until now. There was no funeral – nothing – just his cremated body in an urn.”

Maria had her hand over her mouth, the tears just a blink away from falling. “Jesus, Anna, I’m so very sorry.”

I sniffed and nodded. “That was his lawyer explaining everything. He wants me to come to Northern California and sort things out with Patrick’s house and ashes. He left it all to me.” My lips trembled, but I bit down on them and willed myself not to cry.

“Fuck… how did he even die?” she asked.

“An aneurysm…it was unexpected. He must have been all alone when it happened.” The mere thought made me want to bawl my eyes out.

Maria shook her head and sighed. “So when are you planning on leaving.”

My eyes snapped to hers. “I don’t think I can – not yet.”

“Why not?”

“It’s still winter, and I have work. It’s just too much,” I shook my head as if to clear it of the idea.

“Although the circumstances are not ideal, this may be exactly what you need, Anna.”

I gawked at her. “How so? This isn’t even a train stop away, Mar; it’s thousands of miles away. I-”

“Listen, you still haven’t given yourself the time to fully get over what Hector did.”

Another lump formed in my throat that I forced myself to swallow. “This isn’t about Hector.”

“All I’m saying is, the time away might be good.”

I pondered on it for a second. “Greenvale just has so many bad memories for me,” I whispered under my breath, staring at my folded hands.

“And you’re going there to celebrate the only good one you’ve ever had there,” she smiled. “Think about it for a while. I’m gonna order us some pizza and ice cream, and then we can watch Outlander again for the hundredth time,” she laughed.

I smiled, watching as Maria got up to do just that. Shuffling down on the sofa, pulling the blankets over my shoulders, I allowed my thoughts to overwhelm me. Patrick’s face came to mind, and all I

wanted to do was cry. The fact that I had called him last week amazed me. He was chirpy as always, with a voice that always seemed to be filled with joy, even when he was serious. Back in Greenvale, it was one of the many things about him that held me together. My family had been falling apart, I was being bullied at school, but Patrick had been there, helping me get through all of it. He was my anchor when everything was sinking around me. The fact that he was gone was like a huge boulder that came crashing into me over and over again, nailing me a little harder with each thought of him. Going back to it all would be too much; I would be swamped with even more memories, but I had to, didn't I? Patrick meant so much to me – the least I could do was honor his wishes.

"Okay, the order is in. What do you wanna do in the meantime?"

"I'm gonna take a few days off and go to Greenvale, and then I'm gonna come back and get my life in order."

"What- Anna, your life is fine." Maria seemed confused.

"As much as I love living with you, I need to find myself a new place again. It's been almost two months since Hector and I ended things. You were right… maybe this little trip will help me regardless of the circumstances," I smiled.

Maria's mouth fell open. "Anna, you can still live here when you get back. We can still be roommates."

"I know, but we aren't in college anymore, and I can't spend the rest of my life pining over a man who didn't want me," I exclaimed. Maria seemed to recoil as she looked at me, the tension easing from her face, which told me she understood where I was coming from."

"I just need to do this," I continued. "For myself."

She sighed and nodded. "I know," she said, pulling me in for another hug.

***

A day later, I had put in for some personal time off at the office and was packing a bag to leave the state the following day. Each piece of clothing seemed heavy, but thanks to Maria, I was well on my way to getting it all done.

"Do you even know anyone else back in Greenvale? I mean, all your family moved back here, right? The place is kinda underpopulated if you ask me."

I laughed. “There are a few people – none that I was close to, but I bet I’d still recognize them if it ever came to that.”

“What about your friends in high school? Where are they?”

“Um, I only had two friends, and we went our separate ways after we graduated. We stayed in touch for a while, and then we didn’t,” I shrugged.

Maria nodded, and I bit my lips as I contemplated telling her a part about my childhood that I had never told her about before. This seemed like a convenient time anyway, seeing that I would be heading back to the very place it all started.

“I was bullied in high school, so I only stuck to the people I knew initially and stayed away from everyone else. Patrick was mostly my go-to. I liked that he was secluded from everyone else and had a big lake near his house. It was everything – it was peaceful.”

“Anna, you never told me you were bullied,” Maria exclaimed, her eyes wide as she stared at me.

“It was just a part of me I couldn’t bring myself to tell anyone because I was so ashamed.”

Maria’s brows furrowed. “Ashamed? How?”

“This guy made my life a living hell on a daily basis with his verbal abuse, but I still found myself attracted to him somehow, even though I hated him so much,” I scoffed and zipped up my suitcase.

“Wow, so where is he now?” Maria asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Patrick mentioned once that he was still there, and I’m not surprised. He’s not the type to venture out and explore. People like him would rather suffocate in that stagnant town than go out and see actual life. I just hope I don’t bump into him when I get there.”

“And what if you do?”

“Maybe I’ll develop enough courage to tell him a piece of my mind.”

Maria grinned. “Oh, I would pay money to see that.”

I smiled. “I probably won’t anyway. He lived on the other side of town. There’s a slim chance I’ll see him.”

Maria choked up a laugh. “The same town with a population of about three thousand?”

I rolled my eyes. “My point is, Carter Strande can go to hell for all I care. I’m not going there to reacquaint myself with anyone or catch up

on the past. As soon as I scatter Patrick's ashes, I will be home."

"Speaking of, what do you plan on doing with his house?"

"I don't know yet. I still find it hard to grasp the fact that he's dead. I haven't thought so far ahead."

Maria nodded, pinning her golden tresses behind her ear. "Well, I haven't seen the place, but I think it would be a great vacation home," she smiled.

I raised a brow. "Vacation in Greenvale? Yeah, I don't see that happening," I laughed.

"Well, I don't care for the people there, but the spot seems nice. A cabin in the woods with a lakefront. I'd say that's a catch. Sometimes, the city can be overwhelming – I'm sure you know that."

I shrugged. "I guess."

Later that night, I sat in bed, checking Hector's Instagram for the millionth time since we broke up. I assumed he already had a woman, seeing he couldn't find a solid reason to end things. I figured that maybe he got bored of me – bored of the relationship. '*This isn't working,*' was all he said – all he left me to base the breakup on, and I had to accept it as hard as it was for me to do. No amount of begging him to explain himself changed his mind. He was done with me, and I could see it in his eyes, a coldness that was as plain as day – one that I hadn't expected. But Hector was always unpredictable; I just never thought that the unexpected gifts or roses… the random dates he would bring me out of nowhere. I just never knew that the unpredictability would be something that ruined what we had.

My eyes stung, and I hugged myself, but I paused as my fingers touched the scar on my arm. I traced my hand over it, wincing, feeling the need to cry even more as an old memory filled me.

Ok, Emmie… I'll see you tomorrow." I waved at my best friend as I made my way out of the school gates and on the path home. I had a smile on my face because, for the first time in a long time, I had not bumped into my bully. Today was a good day, and I was thankful for small mercies such as this. As I neared home, I decided to make a detour and visit Patrick. It was a Friday evening, and he was probably by his lake fishing. I got excited at the thought, knowing that he'd make the best dinner out of it after fishing. I preferred that to pizza and the loud arguments I'd get home to.

But as I started to tread the road to Patrick's cabin, I paused in my tracks, my heart immediately picking up pace – my palms gone sweaty. My stomach felt tight because Carter Strande was on the same path as me…

walking towards me with a smile on his conniving face. I wanted to run, but I was seemingly frozen in that spot as he approached me with his swagger and the dangerous glint in his whiskey-colored eyes.

"Well, well, well… if it isn't the little shrimp."

I swallowed hard. He stopped in front of me, his gaze roving over my body as he gritted his teeth. "Missed me today?"

I remained rigid, casting my gaze to the ground – anything to avoid eye contact. What are you even doing in these parts? Rich little princess like you."

I licked my lips. "This is a free country, Carter," I developed the courage to say, not too pleased with the sound of my voice.

"And yet it doesn't really feel like it. Not with your pops running around acting like he owns the place."

My eyes shot up to his. "My father was the one who gave yours a job so you could live the measly life you live now. It's not our fault this town is too drunk and lazy most of the time to actually do something about their pitiful situations. You were lucky when my family moved here; otherwise, you'd all be just a bunch of nobodies, taking up space where actual good people belong!"

I didn't know where the words came from; I just knew I regretted them as soon as they left my mouth. I was breathing hard – fuming even. I wasn't really a fan of my dad, but he was the only one who gave this place hope. Ungrateful people like Carter couldn't see that – they refused to.

But I knew I had ventured on dangerous grounds. Carter's eyes were piercing, his teeth were clenched, and I could see that with his visibly hardened jaw. He looked deadly, and at that second, I feared for my life. This was my first time standing up to him, but unlike the movies or the novels, he didn't seem like the type of bully to stand down. He was lethal.

"I swear to God, shrimp… if you don't fucking run, I'll do something I won't likely regret." Each word was a threat. I could feel it sizzle against my skin… down my spine. I could feel the rage filtering off him, making me fearful.

I swallowed, took a step back and almost gasped from the crunch of my footstep. Carter's hands were balled into fists as he towered over me like a giant. Heck, his height alone should've been enough of a red flag before I decided to be sassy.

I feared what he would do at that moment, and so I took off running, my pants echoing in my ear as I tried my best to get away from him. It occurred to me that Carter wasn't the type that was all bark. He could have snapped my neck if he wanted to. My eyes got blurry; the tickle on my

face made me realize I was crying as I burrowed through the bushes for safety, but I must not have looked where I was going because I came to a sudden halt when pain ripped through my body. I screamed and squinted at the tears as I assessed the damage. My sweater was soaked red and so was the tip of a broken branch hanging into the road.

I looked back to see if Carter was behind me and thankfully, he wasn't.

I sighed in bed and brushed away the last of the memory. No matter where I went and how many times I tried to forget my high school bully, this scar would always remind me of him no matter how much I willed myself to forget.

Chapter 2

Anna

Maria followed me to the airport the following day, wanting to be by my side until she no longer could.

"I'll miss you…even if it's for like four days," she said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Maybe less," I reassured. "I'll miss you too, bestie."

"Ok, go before I start sobbing again!" she exclaimed, laughing.

I grinned and reached for my suitcase. Maria jumped into my arms and hugged me one last time. "Don't forget to call me as soon as you get there."

"I will."

We parted ways, and half an hour later, I was inside an airplane. All I could do was think about how the time spent would be. All the memories… I didn't know if I was prepared for any of it, but I knew it was something that had to be done.

When I arrived in Greenvale, I was thankful I had decided to get dressed in winter gear because even though it wasn't snowing, it was very cold. My car arrived, and I took a breath of the crisp, fresh air, looking at the small town, which had come a long way since I was in high school. I had thought the town would go back to square one after my dad left for the big city, but apparently, they were inspired and decided to make something of themselves. The homes were lovely now, and there were a few structures that hadn't been there when we were around. Memories flooded through me when I passed the refinery my dad had owned. It was abandoned now and not as sophisticated as it once was.

Many people earned a living from it, and to this day, I was still puzzled as to why he decided to shut it down in the first place. Whenever I asked, he always said it wasn't what he hoped it would be in the long run and that it cost him more to keep it going than the profit he was making. I never really questioned his decision to pick up and leave a town we had spent ten years in anyway; I was so happy to leave that I gladly welcomed anything.

That desperation was because of Carter, who filled me with fear each passing day. I couldn't fathom living in Greenvale forever after being bullied by him constantly. So when my dad told me we were leaving, I welcomed the news, even though I knew I would be

leaving behind Patrick and my friends. Saying goodbye to Patrick was the hardest, though. He was more family than my dad, who thought he could buy my love with lovely things, and my mom, who was an alcoholic for as long as I knew her. Neither was reliable and didn't care much about my opinion, but I didn't really mind that when I left Greenvale and knew I'd be off to college and away from them for a long time.

The ride to Patrick's cabin seemed longer than before and was overcrowded with bushes I knew would become problematic. The car suddenly came to a stop, and the driver turned to look at me.

"This is as far as I'll go, missy. Can't risk getting stuck up there."

My eyes widened as I stared at him, waiting for him to say something. But the look in his eyes told me to get out, so he could go about his day. I huffed as I paid him and struggled as I pulled out my small suitcase and carry-on. He drove off as soon as my things were out, and I was left fuming at the lack of chivalry—typical Greenvale.

Sighing, I made my way up the narrow path, struggling to roll the suitcase's wheels along the bumpy, pudgy path. But I was happy with the distraction of the dewy forest scents, the green trees – nature. I couldn't help my smile, and in no time, I was staring at the cabin, which brought back so many memories at one glance.

If one thing remained the same in Greenvale, it was this. It was just as I remembered; it was a small, cozy wooden cabin with a big, beautiful lake view that I couldn't get tired of seeing.

"Ms Cambridge, you're here." A tall, dark man stepped from inside the house with a jacket over his tailored suit. I recognized his voice as the one I had spoken to on the phone and knew it was Patrick's lawyer, Mr. Hendricks.

"I hope your flight was good; it's nice to meet you, although I wish it were under better circumstances," he smiled.

"Likewise," I offered. "My flight was great, thanks. I'm surprised you're actually here. I know you said you'd meet me here when I arrived, but I didn't actually think you'd make the trip."

"Oh, I'm a man of my word, and I figured I'd officially welcome you back to Greenvale."

I managed a tight smile.

"Plus, there was something I wanted to discuss with you in person before you settle in."

I quirked a brow as I stared at him, curious more than ever. "What's that?"

Mr. Hendricks' eyes dropped to my suitcase. "Let me help you with that. I made a fresh pot of coffee before you got here."

"Oh, I'm not really a fan of coffee," I informed, watching as he pulled my luggage to the house.

Hendricks flung his head back and gave me a sceptical glance before he chuckled deeply. "American?"

I laughed. "Yeah, most people can't believe it either. What else did you want to discuss?" I was getting impatient.

Hendricks flung the door open, and I paused in my tracks as memories filled me and tears threatened to spill. I could smell Patrick all over. The cigarettes were faint, his brand of old spice fragrances and the pungent smell of cedarwood. It was so masculine – so Patrick. A painful lump formed in my throat, and I could feel it rising …

"Miss Cambridge?" Mr. Hendricks's voice brought me back to reality.

I shook my head. "Yeah, I er- call me Anna, please."

He smiled and gave me curt nod. "Well, in that case, call me Randall."

I smiled. "So, what did you want to talk to me about?" I asked.

"Hey, Randall, I'm sorry I'm late. I kinda got held up at the bar." A voice suddenly came from the front door. My heart instantly began to thrum in my chest, and it felt like my throat was closing up as the slightly familiar sound resonated in my head. I felt sweaty; I felt confused and angry as emotions threatened to overwhelm me.

"No problem, man. Carter, I'd like you to meet Anna Cambridge, although I know you two are already familiar with each other," an oblivious Hendricks said, confirming my suspicions - making this all the more difficult.

The silence that filled the room could be cut with a knife. I turned around to face my fears and was shocked at the findings. It was Carter alright, but he was somehow even more handsome than the last time I saw him, though his eyes were the fucking same – dangerous and cold, causing a shiver down my spine. He seemed shocked to see me, too, but for the first time in forever, the look in his eyes didn't resemble pure hatred as he stared at me, which confused me. But the longer I stared at him, his good looks seemed to fade and all I could remember was my bully who made my life a living hell…

"What the hell are you doing here?" I blared, my voice sounding a

lot harsher than I had expected.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he shifted in his spot and ducked under the door, staring at me as if it were the first time. "Nice to see you, too, Anna." The corner of his mouth quirked in a smirk as he crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway he filled out completely.

When was it not *Shrimp*? The name that I hated so much – the word that made me feel some odd resentment towards the seafood. When did that change?

I huffed and turned to Hendricks, shooting a brow up at him. "What's going on here? And why is he here?"

Hendricks held out his hand as if a signal of surrender. "Listen, how about we sit and have a civilized, adult conversation?" he said as he shuffled towards the sofa in the living room.

I snapped my head back to Carter, who I found staring at me. I swallowed hard and watched as he shrugged and moved past me to sit alongside Hendricks. The last thing I wanted to do was sit and talk with Carter around. I wanted to run for the hills, but being so curious about the issue at hand, I forcefully walked and flopped down on a single-seated sofa facing them.

"What is this about?" I asked.

Hendricks took a deep sigh. "Patrick made everything profoundly clear in his will, including that he didn't want a funeral and asked that his body be cremated and his ashes scattered by both of you."

I swallowed as I shook my head. "I don't understand how he's involved in any of this," I said, darting a glare at Carter.

"When you moved away to your little city, I was the one who stuck beside Patrick," he said with a voice that seemed to vibrate through my whole body.

"When since? In high school, all you did was cause the old man trouble with your group of delinquent assholes!" I shot at him.

He scoffed and shook his head. "Here we go again. You never really came off that high horse, did you?" he spat. "How could I expect better anyway when you moved to be surrounded by people just like you."

I opened my mouth to talk, completely enraged, but Hendricks beat me to it. "Guys, guys! Let's calm down, shall we? Mr. Nash adored both of you equally – he had nothing but good things to say about you."

I shook my head. “I refuse to believe that,” I mumbled under my breath. Carter shook his head.

“Miss Cambridge, on the phone, I told you that Patrick left the property to you, but truth is, it was left for the two of you.”

I eased back in my chair, my mouth slightly hanging open as I processed what he was saying. I could tell that Carter was surprised, too, but he didn’t wear his emotions on his sleeve unlike me.

“What?”

“You two were the closest thing Patrick had to a family. He wanted you to have this,” Hendricks was saying. I was still utterly confused about Carter’s role in all of this. Patrick rarely talked about him when I left Greenvale and after the trouble he was in high school…there had to be a mistake.

I darted my eyes towards Carter. “Did you blackmail Patrick into this?” I hissed at him.

Carter stared at me as if I’d lost my mind and scoffed as he got up and moved towards the door. “I don’t have to take this bullshit.”

“Carter, wait!” Hendricks called, shooting up to his feet as he moved towards him. He huffed out a breath and stood between us. “Can you guys please stop for a second, please? This is what Patrick wanted – forget about yourselves for a second and consider his dying wish. He wanted you both here for a reason.”

You could hear a pin drop on cotton after that statement as I pondered Hendricks’ words. I was still confused and knew it would be hard to fathom any of this, but the truth was there, and there was no reason for Hendricks to lie. I was just completely baffled.

“Sure, I can be civilized,” Carter said as he jabbed a cryptic glare at me. I bit my tongue and allowed silence to take course.

Hendricks sighed and managed a smile. “Good, well I don’t think there’s much left to say. There will be a few paperwork left for you guys, and then the rest is all for you to figure out amongst yourselves.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me this over the phone?” I asked.

“Because I feared you wouldn’t make the trip if you knew, and I knew that Patrick wanted you here more than anything.”

I hung my head and swallowed, ashamed of myself because I didn’t know how I would have reacted over the phone and if I would even be here if I’d known that Carter would be here too.

“Patrick didn’t have any family except for you guys. And he

wanted to thank you both by giving you all he had."

I glanced at Carter and somehow, I still felt some sort of resentment for the remorseful, sad look on his face. This was my moment – my moment to bask in the memories and mourn Patrick the way I wanted to, but here he was, taking that away from me, and I hated it. I hated that he seemed like a far cry from the bully he was in high school. I had pictured seeing the man again, but nothing prepared me for this. I wish I was confronted by stained teeth instead of pearly whites and the ghastly look I had expected from him being a bum who had nothing to contribute to society. But he was the complete fucking opposite, and it irked me somehow. So fucking much, to be honest.

"Well, I'll leave you guys to it. If you need anything, you know where to reach me," Hendricks said, breaking the small silence.

My heart skipped a beat. "Wait, you're leaving?"

He chuckled. "Well, yes. I have work to get back to, and I'm sure all this has nothing to do with me, dear," he smiled.

I glanced at Carter who pushed his sleeves further up his elbow as he crossed his arms – accentuating his bulky muscles. He must have figured out what I was thinking because as soon as his gaze met mine, he scoffed and shook his head.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you or anything remotely close to it," he said, but I didn't want to believe any of that was true. But what choice did I have anyway?

"I'm sure you guys will get along in no time. I'd better be on my way," Hendricks said as she moved past Carter and went outside.

"Don't count on it," Carter mumbled under his breath, and I rolled my eyes.

Soon, it was just the two of us in the cabin, and quite frankly, I didn't know what to expect from a man I had not seen in years – a man who'd done nothing but make my life a living hell in the past. Could I trust him? I most certainly could not.

I wandered around the house, reacquainting myself with some old things I had last seen when I left for the big city. Some things were new, but they all reminded me of Patrick regardless. I moved to a small wall table he had made all my himself for photos. Each one was framed and in neat order. The black and white one of him and his mom was in the back. It was the only one he said he had left of her after she died when he was just a teen. The front ones were bursting with color, and I recognized myself in a few. Most were

taken in summer when the sun was mostly out, and we had made a habit of going fishing. My first catch was photographed and if it weren't for the photo, all of it would have been a distant memory. But looking back, every detail of that day came rushing back, and my eyes started to sting.

I had the biggest smile on my face and the smallest fish in hand, but I was still so proud, and so was Patrick. For a man who barely smiled, he had a huge one in place with his hand slung around me as we smiled for the camera. I became even sadder when I looked at the other photos of us over the grill or eating dinner – we made the most out of every situation and photographed every bit.

I was smiling – close to tears – when everything crashed into the anger that suddenly bubbled up inside me. Carter was there in some of the frames as well. Drinking beer with Patrick, laughing… it was all so strange to me. So infuriatingly strange, but there was no denying that they adored each other based on the pictures.

"That one was last summer." I almost jumped, quickly reminding myself that I wasn't alone. Carter was behind me, and I could feel him as much as I could smell the sweet musk of his perfume. A shiver ran down my spine despite the warmth his presence brought, but I didn't want any of this. I didn't want this effect he had on me – the way my heart skipped a beat but not in fear this time around.

I had to remind myself I hated this man – it was the only way I could get through all this with him being here.

"You just had to, didn't you?" I snapped, grinding my teeth as I looked at the photos.

"What?"

"You just had to figure out a way to agonize me even when I wasn't here?" I seethed as I spun around to face him, almost gasping when I realized he was so close – so handsome. I had to look up, but it was worth any neck strain I would have in the future. Carter was a beautiful man – even more now than in high school.

His thick eyebrows narrowed and that lethal gaze retook residence – making me doubt this entire conversation. "Patrick was my friend, and he was the only part of Greenvale that I cherished with my whole heart, then you of all people just had to come and make this entire experience bitter for me!" I exclaimed as my chest rose and fell.

"Well, maybe you should do a better job of treating the people you 'cherish' better!" he threw back at me with air quotes that made me

even angrier.

“Patrick was like a father to me, so don’t you dare come in here and act like you know my life better than I do!”

“You left here eight years ago and never looked back even for Patrick’s sake and then you claim he was like a father to you,” he scoffed. “I might have done some fucked up things in the past, but I made up for the wrongs I did and was there for Patrick every step of the way. So don’t come marching back now that he’s dead, pretending to be a fucking saint!”

My vision became blurry, but I was fuming so much I could almost feel the steam through my ears. “Fuck you, Carter!” I snapped, pushing past him and running from the house.

My feet were set in the direction of the lake, so that’s where I went as tears streamed down my face. I’d die if I let Carter see me like this. As angry as I was and as much as it hurt to hear the words, I knew I wasn’t exactly innocent in his claims. He was right. I never visited Patrick in the eight years since I left Greenvale and had thought that calls and video calls would suffice, but I could have done more – I should have. I was just too hell-bent on staying away from a place as wretched as this, but here I was again, facing my demons. And this one was a fucking sight for sore eyes.

Chapter 3

Carter

Shit!

The last thing I wanted was problems, but I knew I couldn't avoid them from the moment I saw Anna Cambridge. Patrick talked about her countless times, so I somewhat expected to see her here when he died, although I wasn't holding my breath. When I walked through that door earlier, she was the last person I expected to see, yet the image of her face at that moment was one I wished to see many times after. Anna was a beautiful girl in school, but the transition to womanhood most certainly suited her more. Every feature was accentuated over time, and I knew she had to be the most beautiful woman I'd ever laid eyes on.

If it were anyone else, I'd be looking for a way to charm the socks off her, but in a split second, I was reminded that this was Anna – the person I had loathed back in high school. A part of me still wished that I still carried that resentment, but over the years, with Patrick's help, I had learned to let go of my hatred and constant anger toward the girl. Ironic since she still obviously felt the same way about me.

Not that I could blame her, but Anna needed a constant knock off her high horse and years of being away only seemed to make that worse. Still, I felt a tad guilty for causing her to flee the cabin. I had caught the glistening in her eyes and knew that maybe I'd gone a bit too far. I blew out a breath and raked my hands through my hair as I left the house searching for Anna. She couldn't have gone far considering there wasn't a car, and her bags were still here. As soon as I went outside, my eyes traveled to the lake, and I saw her sitting there on the little bench I made for Patrick. She was overlooking the lake as she hugged herself – her glossy brunette hair being tousled by the wind.

I was hesitant, but I made my way there and paused just an arm's length away from her.

"I didn't ask for any company," she bit out without even having to look around at me.

"I shouldn't have said all that; I'm sorry," I said, sheathing my hands with the warmth of my pockets.

She scoffed. "I didn't know you were capable of such things," she quipped drily.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Anna.”

“I know enough,” she put in almost immediately. A part of me wanted to challenge her on what she meant by that, but the last thing I wanted was another argument, and I knew that would be the only outcome if I did.

I moved toward her and sat beside her on the bench. She glanced at me through the corner of her eyes and shuffled a little. I started to regret my decision as soon as a bout of wind came and filled my nostrils with her scent. It was refreshing and expensive – I could tell – but it made me warm all over.

“Listen, we don’t have to like or even pretend to like each other while you’re here. We just have to tolerate each other enough to get through all the arrangements.”

She didn’t say anything – just kept ignoring me as she stared ahead at anything but me.

“We need to decide what we’re going to do with the house, especially.”

She finally looked at me with fiery green eyes, flattered by long, spiky lashes. “Name a price.”

I scowled at her. “What?”

“I want the cabin. Tell me your price, and I will buy back your portion,” she firmly said.

My mouth must have been hanging because of my shock. “What makes you think I’d want to do that?” I asked her. This would be a lot easier if she weren’t so fucking beautiful.

“Don’t act as if you’d have any use for this house, Carter,” she said as she rolled her eyes and trapped a lock of loose hair behind her studded ear.

“Oh, and you do? As soon as you move back to your fancy little city you’ll sell it to the highest bidder! I’ll be damned if I let that happen!” I exclaimed.

“I’m not-”

“You’re just like your old man, aren’t you? You both have this God complex and think you can flash your money around and it will fix anything,” I scoffed, watching how her eyes blazed at me.

“You don’t know anything about me or my father!”

“More than you know!” I snapped.

She got up again, ready to flee, and I almost laughed to myself.

“Great, do what you do best, Anna, run,” I said as I stood.

She paused in her tracks and spun around, shooting daggers at me with piercing eyes. Her face had gotten a little pink, and her ears were red. “I wouldn’t have to run so much if it weren’t for you!” she jabbed, pointing at me – so fucking close I could feel her breath against me. “You made my life a living hell here every second of every fricking day!”

I took a step back as if she had struck me. It wasn’t like I could forget that I had bullied her throughout high school. The memories were still ripe and vivid, but I had my reasons and managed to get past them. Why couldn’t she do the same?

I sighed. “Look, I was stupid and was looking for someone to be angry with; I’m sorry about the past.”

She stared at me for a long minute before she shook her head and started her trek to the house. I followed behind her and paused at the door when I saw her picking up her things.

“What are you doing?”

“None of your business, Carter.”

“I thought you’d be staying here.”

“You thought wrong.”

“Well, it’s either this or some run-down motel in town. You don’t look like a fan of cockroaches or drug dealers.”

She paused in her tracks, her face going pale as she stared at me. “This house is ours now; you can stay here. I have my own place, so you don’t have to worry about me.”

“I wasn’t,” she quipped.

“Figured. Anyway, how about you get settled in, and I’ll leave you to it. In the morning, I will stop by, and we can try again at a level-headed conversation. You must be jet-lagged anyway.”

I was happy when I was welcomed with zero sass. She was still looking at me, but I could see she was just trying to process all this in her pretty little head. She had the cutest pout, I doubt she was even aware of, and I couldn’t help my smirk.

“Fine, you know anywhere around here other than Lassie’s where I can get a good meal?”

I chuckled. “I know just the place. Lassie’s has been out of business for quite a while now anyway. Not much you could get there.” I glanced out front and remembered mine was the only vehicle

present. “Want a ride?”

She shifted and adjusted the bag on her shoulder before looking to the floor. “I guess.” I held back my smile and nodded as I walked outside with Anna following behind.

When we hopped in the van, we were silent for a while until she said. “How did you even get up here? The cab I took from the airport said he couldn’t get so far,” she mumbled.

“I know my way around,” I shrugged.

And just like that, we were met with silence again, but I didn’t want to say anything for this to turn into world war three, so I kept quiet and observed the way she looked out the window to ignore me. I smiled at the seatbelt strapped around her and knew I shouldn’t have expected any less. That was Anna Cambridge, alright. We rode into the small town area and arrived at the bar. She finally glanced at me with her brows furrowed.

“This is new. When did it go up?” she asked as she unbuckled herself.

“A year ago. Guaranteed to have the best food in town,” I smiled as I stepped out and moved to Anna’s side. She came out after with her eyes trailing all over the place. I waited for the moment and when it arrived, the reaction didn’t fail.

“This is yours?” she asked with widened eyes and an open mouth.

She looked back to the sign *‘Carter’s Bar & Grill’* and then to me. I couldn’t help my smile. “Yep!”

The expression I would pay to see again faded and that cold, cryptic Anna took over once again. “Not bad, Strande. Nice to know that the cycle of laziness in this town didn’t hit you.” She managed a tight smile and walked towards the entrance while I had to bite my tongue from saying something I’d likely regret.

I blew out a breath and followed behind, happy to see the people that littered the inside. However, this time, all the eyes weren’t on me. Instead, they were on Anna, who paused a little to take in the curious eyes before she headed for the counter. The boisterous conversations and the country music died down to collective whispers.

I rounded the counter and stood before her after I slipped on an apron. “what can I get you?” I asked.

Anna reached for a menu and scanned it before she looked up to me with her mouth in a twist. “I guess I’ll have the Greenvale Classic chicken sandwich?”

I smiled. “Good choice.”

“Of course it is,” she mumbled.

She reached for her phone as she waited, obviously not interested in a conversation with me or anyone for that matter. She was seemingly unfazed by the whispers or the fact that she had gotten the attention of everyone in the bar. It was like no one existed but her.

The burger came under fifteen minutes, and she finally looked up to assess it. I was busy serving someone else, but I watched her reaction as I did so. When she took a bite, her eyes fluttered, and I could have sworn I heard a moan despite the noisy bar.

“So Cambridge is back,” my best bud, Andrew said as he chugged his beer and glanced at Anna who was busy mauling her food.

“Yep, not for long, though. She’s just here to sort things out regarding Patrick.”

“I didn’t know they were still in touch.”

“Yeah, they never lost the connection.”

Andrew chuckled. “She must still hate your guts.”

I grinned. “Of course, she still does.”

“But I bet you wish you were in hers,” he said as he slyly looked at me over the rim of his glass. “She’s a fucking beauty, that’s for sure. Has a nice ass too, from what I saw when she came in.”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s alright.”

“All you need to do is say sorry and explain why you hated her, and you’ll be on her good side.”

I gave it a second’s thought. “Yeah, I don’t see that happening. I’m not going to try and butter up to her, and the last thing I want to do is rehash all that from the past,” I shook my head and refilled Andrew’s glass.

“Well, you know what they say; secrets always find a way of coming out.”

“That wasn’t exactly a secret. I don’t care if she knows or not.”

A thick brow rose. “So you wouldn’t mind if I walked over and spilled my guts to her?”

I flashed him a hard stare that anchored him to the chair. “That doesn’t matter anyway. I shouldn’t have bullied her in high school. It wasn’t exactly her fault.”

Andrew scoffed. “So where’s she staying?”

“Up at the cabin,” I didn’t hesitate to say.

“All by herself?”

I nodded and watched as the expression changed on Andrew’s face. “You know the low-lives in this town won’t hesitate when they hear a beautiful woman is up there all by herself.”

“She’ll be fine, and I doubt she’ll be here long anyway.”

Andrew rose a brow, not at all convinced about the ‘fine’ part, and I wasn’t sure I was either. I hadn’t given it much thought, but this town was in fact filled with the type of people Anna thought I’d become. She would be all alone in the woods, perfect for people who wanted to take advantage.

I glanced her way and realized she had a bite of the burger left, which would be trash food from the looks of it, but I was somewhat happy that she enjoyed it. Which was weird considering I shouldn’t give a rat’s ass about what she thought of me and my business. She wiped at her small, naturally pink mouth and took a sip of her coke before reaching for her phone which started to ring.

She immediately slid from her bar stool, glanced at me with the phone to her ear and then left the bar. I sighed as I watched her go. Andrew was right; she had a nice ass.

Chapter 4

Anna

I looked around to see if anyone was nearby and was happy when I realized no one was.

“Yes Mar, I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier to tell you I arrived safely but things just kinda went superfast,” I explained to an upset Maria on the other end.

“What do you mean? What happened?”

I rubbed my temple as I leaned against a rail at the front. “So, remember I told you I was bullied in high school?”

“Yeah… wait! Did you bump into him?” she almost shrieked. “Did he cause you trouble?” she fumbled.

“Er… well, yes I did bump into him and it turns out that Patrick left the property for the two of us.”

There was a slight pause before, “What? How is that even possible? I thought the lawyer said it was all yours…”

“He left out the other part because he thought I wouldn’t make the trip if I knew.”

“Damn, so they were friends all this time?”

“Apparently. There are pictures of them at the cabin and…” I trailed off and sighed. “I just can’t believe Patrick didn’t tell me about it.”

“Yeah, he maybe didn’t want all that contention in your relationship. But how is this bully guy? Is he the bum you expected?”

I bit my lips for a sec. “Far from that. He’s so good-looking Mar and even owns a bar that seems to be doing pretty well, too,” I said as I glanced back at the wooden structure with the huge windows and colorful signs.

“Damn, but you still hate his guts, right?”

I swallowed. “Of course I do. He gave a half-assed apology about the past, and that was it. After all he put me through, I don’t think that will suffice.”

“So, what will?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t know about anything at this point. I just can’t wait to get this over with so I can come home.”

“That makes two of us. I’m starting to miss my best friend.”

I could see Carter making his way over through the corner of my eye. “I miss you too, Mar. Listen, I’ve gotta go; I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Ok, be safe.”

“Will do, bye.”

I ended the call just in time to find Carter standing behind me. He had this worried look as he stared at me with his honey blonde hair blowing in the wind. I tore my gaze away and turned my back to him, staring into the parking lot.

“Can’t a girl get some privacy around here?” I hissed.

“Well, that’s actually what I’m here about,” he said.

I turned to look at him. “Why? What happened?”

“I might have some concerns about you staying at the cabin.”

I could feel my eyebrows coming together in a scowl. “Really, and what might those be?” I asked dryly.

“Staying at the cabin all by yourself might not be a wise choice. You of all people know this town isn’t crawling with upstanding citizens."

I could feel the blood drain from my face and an acidic taste on my tongue as I realized what he meant by that. “Right, I forgot this place is the ultimate paradise for low lives,” I scoffed, shaking my head.

Carter had a scowl on his face. “You do know you don’t have to be this judgemental all the time, right?”

I balked at him. “So you just said that I can’t stay at the cabin because there’s a possibility they might break in and do God knows what, and then you’re blaming me for being judgemental?” I raised a brow, and he sighed.

“Anyway, I just thought I’d let you know. Anya still does her bed and breakfast. There might be available rooms if you’re interested. That’s the other option apart from the crappy motel.”

“What choice do I have at this point, right? Do you have the number to a cab I can call?” I asked, feeling a little too desperate for my pride at this moment. It would be dark soon anyway, so I had to figure this out soon.

“Not if you want to wait for two hours-plus for one. Come on, I will drop you.”

I crossed my arms with a huff. “I can take care of myself y’know.”

“No one said you couldn’t. I’m only making this easier on ya.” He was already headed in the direction of his pick-up. I blew out a breath and followed behind, wishing I had stayed in contact with someone else apart from Patrick, so I wouldn’t feel like my bully was the only option in this wretched place.

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As soon as we arrived at Anya’s bed and breakfast, I knew I’d have issues getting a room. There was a big truck with pest control written on it and men in suits gearing up to enter. Anya was there talking to one of them, but as soon as she spotted Carter’s truck, she waved him off and approached the truck with a huge smile on her face.

“I don’t think we need her to explain the obvious,” I murmured to Carter, who still had his hands glued to the steering wheel.

Anya came and stopped by his window, smiling broadly with her red lipstick a little smudged and her grey-streaked, mousy brown hair blowing in the wind. “Hey, Cart, what brings you here today?” she asked, her eyes shifting to me. Her brows furrowed a bit, and then recognition dawned after a second of staring at me.

“Well, I’ll be damned! Anna? Anna Cambridge?”

I managed a smile. “In the flesh.”

“Girl, you’re looking prettier than ever. Isn’t that right, Cart?” she asked as she glanced at Carter with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

I found myself holding my breath for an answer from Carter, but he cleared his throat instead and said, “Er, we just came to see if you had any available rooms here, but from the looks of it, I don’t think you do.”

“Ahh, yes, we had a little termite issue that I want gone before it starts to snow again. We will be good in a day or two, but I have a few other things that need tending to before I open back up,” she smiled, licking her lips before her eyes darted to me again. “Oh, Anna, are you planning on staying for long?”

“Er no… I’ll be leaving soon.”

“Oh, well, I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help, dear.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Anya glanced back to one of the guys who was signaling to her. “Well, I better get back to it. It was nice seeing you two.”

I released a heavy sigh and plopped back into the seat, closing my eyes. “Great.”

“There’s another option. Although I'm not sure you’ll like it,” Carter said. My eyes popped open to meet his.

“Well, what is it?”

“There’s a spare room at the cabin. I can crash there until you’re ready to leave,” he shrugged as he started back up the van.

I scoffed. “And what makes you think I’ll feel safe with you, of all people? You’re still a bully.”

“Was a bully… and I’ve been driving you around all day. If I wanted to do anything to you, I could have already.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, that’s reassuring.”

He chuckled. “Trust me; you have more to be afraid of than me. I won’t get in your way, so don’t worry.”

I chewed on my bottom lip as I pondered his words. Carter seemed like a changed man, and I assumed he had to be if he was friends with Patrick. But I couldn’t completely trust someone who put me through hell in the past and had not managed to apologize to me like a real man. Maybe it was easy for him to forget and pass it off as nothing, but I had to live with real trauma that still plagued me to this day. What if this were a front that he was putting up? What if it were all an act?

I certainly believed him when he said being alone in the cabin wouldn’t be safe. I’d lived in this town long enough to know that anything was possible with the addicts and bums that resided here, and I wasn’t willing to take that chance. An available hotel was miles away, and I didn’t have the time to be going back and forth and depend on cabs that were almost non-existent in this place.

“Ok, fine. I swear, if you try anything, my best friend knows my every move.”

He snorted. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms as we drove back up to the cabin.

***

Carter drove back to the bar and later grabbed a few things and dinner for the both of us. After that, we were on our way back, and in no time, we were there again. It was already getting dark, and the sunset had cast a purple-ish hue in the sky. The air was crisp, and I knew if there was anything to love about Greenvale, it was probably this. The fresh air, the filling scent of nature – pinewood, cedar, moist earth. I could never get tired of it. I was outside, just taking it all in

and admiring the scenic mountains, when Carter came out of the house and stood behind me. His scent added another drooling combination to what I was already experiencing, and I almost moaned.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he said.

“Very.”

He smiled and peeled off his shirt, which he threw on the wooden steps. My heart started to thrum, and despite the wind, I suddenly felt hot all over. I couldn’t help it; I was staring at the man like his image was the only thing my sight could allow. I took my time to drink in the view of each hardened contour of his upper half – his defined pecs, which were dusted with a bit of hair that looked undoubtedly soft. My fingers inched to touch it and his stone-hard abs. Was there a gym in Greenvale? There wasn’t one last time I checked, and yet, this man would shock a gym-goer.

“What are you doing?” I couldn’t help but ask after realizing that I was probably staring for longer than necessary.

Carter must have caught on, too, because he had a goofy grin that highlighted a dimple I didn’t even know he had.

“This is the best time to take a swim, sweetheart,” he said as he grinned while unbuckling his belt.

I swallowed. “It’s freezing cold!”

“This is as warm as it gets for a while. I’m taking advantage of every second.” The pants were gone as he kicked them beside his shirt, only now sporting underpants that clung to every delicious inch of him. I didn’t want to look, but how could I not when he was right in front of me? I only caught a glimpse of his bulge before he dashed down the lake and towards the deck.

I was breathless for no reason as I watched him before he dived into the cold lake. I couldn’t believe it! I was freezing by just standing here and there he was taking an ice bath. I didn’t dare move further down to look – I didn’t want to make it seem like I was interested or anything like that, but I would die to see his strong body moving around in the water.

Fuck, but what was I doing fantasizing about this man of all people. I should hate him as much as I did in high school, but the feeling wasn’t as strong for some strange reason. I wanted to hate his guts, but it was hard when he was this hot and…nice? I was pitiful! He was only acting. I’m sure he hated me as much, but my body didn’t want to believe that. I could feel the heat in my core, begging for attention.

I could feel the moistness between my legs and knew that I couldn't control my thoughts or my body's reaction to this God of a man.

A few minutes later, he came out soaking wet and dripping all over. Well, at least two of us were soaking. I watched unabashedly as he made his way toward me and knew that I must have been as red as a tomato with the heat that suddenly rushed to my face.

His shoulder-length hair was clamped down on his head but managed to make his angular face more defined. The underwear had traveled slightly lower, exposing his strong V-cut and his obviously big manhood. There was no denying that he was a well-endowed man, and I almost salivated at the thought of having it all.

"You should have joined me," he said with a smile. "I'm gonna dry off, and then we can have dinner." He moved past me and went inside, leaving me there to collect my thoughts from the pit of hell.

He was unfazed, as if he made a habit of swinging his goods around and exposing his body to anyone. But should I expect any different? Carter probably had women at his beck and call – a different one every night. He wasn't the man to stick to one person. He was a heartbreaker, and I hated that more than anything.

But why should I care? It wasn't like I was planning on hooking up with him. That was never going to happen. I would be back home in a few days and forget any of this ever happened.

The problem was getting through the days. It was going to be harder than I thought.

When I went back in, he had on another flannel shirt that he rolled up to his elbows and jeans that were cut off at the knees. He placed the plates on the table and the takeout boxes in the center. I watched him keenly, somehow finding the whole thing sexy. What was with me? Was I this sexually deprived? It had only been two months since I last had sex, and that was just before Hector and I ended things. I'd gone for far longer in the past and was fine.

"I only bought beer from the bar; I hope that's fine," Carter said, causing my head to snap up when I realized I was lost in thought again.

"Er, yeah, that's fine, I guess."

"Well, dinner is ready."

I took a seat around the small circular table on the opposite side of Carter, who had already started to dig in and serve himself. I did the same, eager to take a bit of the chicken linguine. I hadn't had it in a

while and was excited to try Carter's take on it.

He watched as I took the first bite, and I could tell he was looking for some type of approval just like he was at the bar when he thought I didn't notice him staring at me when I ate the burger. But how could I, despite my grudge against him, not tell him that this was the best linguine I had ever tasted. The flavors were bursting in my mouth, and the spice was potent. My face must have been a dead giveaway because he smiled.

"It's good," I managed with a full mouth.

"Thanks."

We continued to eat in silence. There were so many things I wanted to say but didn't want to at the same time. I should hate him; his very presence should irk me, but the fact that it didn't puzzled me.

"I think this was Patrick's favorite meal other than fish," Carter said.

I smiled. "He loved his fish."

"All types… cooked, uncooked. It didn't matter to him."

"He was so happy when I caught my first one. The pic is back there," I said as I gestured towards the table.

He nodded as he ate. "I saw it, and he told me the story too. Said you were a natural."

I chuckled. "Well, I don't know about that, but I always liked doing it with him."

Carter paused to look up at me. "You were really important to him. He said he was really proud of you."

I blinked a few times to stop the stinging in my eyes. I didn't want to cry now. "He was very important to me too."

There was a small silence before I said, "When are you planning to scatter his ashes?"

"It's really up to you. You're the one who has to get back to your life," he said as he took a drink.

"I guess we could do it tomorrow."

He nodded and stood, bringing the plates to the sink.

I headed to the bathroom and took a shower. There was no sign of Carter when I came out, so I went to the porch and started scrolling through my phone because there wasn't really anything else to do. I went on Instagram to stalk Hector's profile but was surprised when I saw that there was a text message from him. I held my breath as I

tapped on the message. My chest rose as I read what he had to say:

Hey beautiful, can we talk?

Why would he want to talk months after a failed engagement? I was tempted to close the chat and ignore it, but more than anything, I was curious as to what he wanted to say.

What is it? I replied.

I'd prefer if we discussed this in person. Are you free tomorrow?

I'm not in the city. Why was I even telling him this? It was none of his business.

Where are you? Another message came.

"Hey, care for some company?" Carter's voice came. He was already sitting before I could give an answer, sporting a smug smile on his face, which told me his actions were intentional. This wasn't exactly the best time, but maybe it was better than Hector and his confusion. Maybe I needed some time before I replied to him anyway.

I glanced at the small antique-looking box in his hand and then at him. "What's up?"

"These are some things that Patrick left behind," he said as he opened the box. "He always said he wanted to give you these whenever he got the chance."

I looked in the box and took note of the jewelry: the rings, the clips and the necklaces.

"This was his mother's," Carter said as he took up the blue-gemmed hair clip. "He always talked about giving it to you on your wedding day. Something blue." My eyes started to sting again, but I wasn't sure if I could stop the tears this time.

"Last time I heard, you were engaged. You could bring it back with you."

I blinked, but instead of keeping the tears at bay, they came streaming down my face, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. My heart felt so bare at that moment.

"Me and my fiancé broke things off about two months ago. I couldn't bring myself to tell Patrick because I didn't want him to be disappointed in me," I sobbed.

Carter stared at me in shock. "I'm sorry," he said. "He would have understood. He wouldn't have judged."

"I know," I snapped unintentionally. "Things were always just so perfect whenever we talked. I didn't want to ruin that."

"I understand."

I sniffed, biting into my trembling lips. "I should have visited. I should have been there for him in his last moments. I just assumed that everything was fine. He was old, but it didn't occur to me that, at any given time, he could die. I got used to the calls and assumed that was enough," I sniffed, wiping at my tears as they fell.

"There was no way of knowing. Patrick was healthy otherwise. No one could have predicted this. Things like this happen," Carter was saying. I tried my best to cling to his words and find comfort in them, but I just couldn't help but hate myself in this moment.

"You were right. This isn't how you treated someone who was like a father to you. He was more of a father to me than my own. I cherished every single moment I spent with him, but it wasn't enough. I should have done more."

"Hey, Anna, look at me," Carter said. More tears streamed down my face, but I managed to turn to look at him. His brown eyes were soft and kind. "You were the most important thing in Patrick's life. He had nothing but good things to say about you. He could have felt your love despite the distance, trust me. You did enough."

I nodded slowly, thankful for his words and the look in his eyes, which spoke a lot more than words. The familiar heat consumed my body once again, and I was almost lost in Carter's eyes. I found myself leaning in like he was a magnet pulling me in. Maybe that was true because we were complete opposites, and I couldn't pull myself away. His eyes lowered to my mouth, and I could feel his breath against me. A part of my brain wanted me to see logic, but I was too far gone. I wanted to taste his mouth. I wanted to savor the flavor and the feel of his skin on mine. My body was begging for the caress, and I was sure my panties were sodden again. How could I stop myself? I couldn't. My fate was inevitable, and all the stars were aligned for this moment.

When my lips touched his, I held my breath and reveled in the feathery softness before his mouth parted and took mine in. I moaned because the pleasure that coursed through me was like no other. Our lips only brushed against each other – as if testing the waters before the big dive, but I was so hot – so eager and impatient for more. My hands circled his neck and pulled him closer, going deeper until I could taste the flavor of mint on his breath and the sweet warmth that rushed through my veins like a bolt of lightning. Carter's hands found my waist as he pulled me closer to him to further bask in the kiss. My hard nipples pressed against his chest, and I had to keep myself from moaning once again. My fingers raked through his still-damp hair as I urged him deeper into my mouth. His stubble tickled my skin, but his

tongue was doing wonders in my mouth. I was burning at a fever pitch that wouldn't die down anytime soon.

My core tightened at the thought of him between my legs or my own straddled over his. I was craving more – more than this could possibly offer.

But then my phone vibrated again, which brought me back to reality. I pulled away, breathing heavily, staring into Carter's darkened, lust-filled eyes. I was tempted to damn it all to hell once again, but then logic won over, and I shifted a little on the chair to create some distance between us.

"I er… I shouldn't have done that; I'm sorry."

"N-no… it's my fault I shouldn't…" Carter trailed off and raked his hand through his hair, scratching the spot.

"I should head in. It's getting late anyway. Good night."

I got up and dashed to the bedroom, flopping down on the bed as I tried to process what happened out there and how quickly it did. However, my brain didn't allow me much but memories of it. It was as if I could still feel his mouth on mine; how his teeth grazed over my lips and gently tugged them before he entwined my tongue with his in a passionate caress. My heart was still beating fast, and I knew that if I stayed a minute longer, it would probably burst in my chest. I had never experienced something so intense in my entire life – not even with Hector.

I still craved more. The taste of his lips, his calloused hands around my waist, the crisp scent of his clothes and the freshness of his skin. I had always found Carter attractive, but never in my life had I ever expected to feel this way because of him. Could I go back to living life as usual, knowing this man had the potential to make me feel so much more?

My phone vibrated again. Frustrated, I reached for it and almost rolled my eyes when I saw that it was Hector again.

'??' was the first text, followed by;

Well?

I huffed out a breath and threw the phone to the side. For the first time in a long time, another man occupied my mind for the night.

Chapter 5

Carter

Never in my life had a woman plagued my thoughts as much as Anna did now. Maybe it was that I never had to wait or do much to get them. I usually got whomever I wanted, but here Anna was different in so many ways. As attractive as she was, I hadn't expected the kiss to be that good. Damn, more than good even. There was no way of describing how incredible her lips had felt against mine – how sweet her mouth was. How warm.

As I lay in my bed, desperate for some other thought, Anna kept coming back. The memory would stick; I knew. But that wasn't the hard part. The hard part was waking up tomorrow, knowing I couldn't have her. Knowing that even though she allowed this, she wouldn't allow it to happen a second time. The days would be torturous… I already knew that as much as I knew that I wouldn't likely get any sleep tonight with her just in the other room. I was fucked, and yet I was far from it.

I was hard as a rock, and all I wanted was her to quell the hunger than raged like wildfire inside me. Fuck my life and the universe for being so spiteful. This was the karma I got for bullying her in high school. I was now the one in agony, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The following day I got up, feeling like a walking dead. I didn't get an ounce of sleep because my thoughts were reckless, and so was the constant boner that came and went like my past lovers.

I entered the kitchen hoping to get some coffee and found Anna there, making something that didn't smell like coffee. I paused in my tracks, unsure of how to react now that it was a new day and things had become clearer.

As if sensing my presence, she turned to face me. Her eyes swept over my frame, and she managed a brief smile before she spun around to do what she was doing before I entered. "Good morning. I made enough tea just in case you wanted some," she said.

My eyes roamed over her from behind. I took the chance, knowing I probably wouldn't be as bold if her eyes were on me. She still had a robe on but had managed to grip it so tight that I could still see the delicious flare of her hips and her round ass. Her hair dangled in her back, a bit tousled, almost brushing her ass. My manhood stirred in my pants, and I resisted the urge to mutter a curse. Her body on mine

was what I'd want for breakfast…to explore every inch of smooth, supple flesh. Oh, what I'd give.

"Tea is great, thanks," I said, putting my thoughts to a halt before I could stir up an embarrassing boner.

I watched as she poured me a cup, and I approached her. She handed me the cup, and our gazes met for a brief second before she tore hers away and took a sip of her tea.

"I was thinking maybe we could scatter the ashes before I head to the bar. I might not have time after."

She slowly nodded, her green eyes on me once again. "Sure, I guess we could do that."

About twenty minutes later, we both got dressed. I picked up the urn, and we both went out front. Anna paused and stared at the water body ahead, seemingly nostalgic as she did so.

"He said he wanted it scattered in his favorite place," she said just above a whisper.

I nodded. "I guess it's the lake, right?"

"It is, but there was a part that he liked the most. He always said that it was beautiful and peaceful and that he just couldn't get enough. If I remember correctly, it's up a little hill, and then we walk down to a graveled path."

"I think I know where you're talking. Let's go."

We started our trek, and it wasn't long before I realized Anna was admiring the vegetation as we walked. She even stopped at times to listen to the birds, and I smiled to myself when her face lifted with a genuine smile that I found myself longing to see more of. There was this undeniable innocence in her – almost like the weight of the world had been lifted off her shoulders as she breathed in the fresh air and ran her hand along any available branch in her path.

"Ever thought about living in a place like this?" I asked.

She glanced at me, her forehead wrinkled. "I had for ten years."

"But not quite this part."

"I guess I could, but I also like the city, which is just a burst of possibilities. What job would I have in Greenvale?" she scoffed.

"Greenvale has potential too. It just needs the right people to see that."

"Last time someone saw that, people didn't take it well. These people are just not fans of growth."

“And by someone, you mean your dad?” I countered, and she paused, turning to me.

“Right. I might not be a fan of him, but it isn’t because he was a bad person, it was because he was a lousy dad. All he ever did was try to better this town.”

I scoffed and shook my head. “Oh, that’s definitely what he wanted everybody to think.”

She raised her chin and crossed her arms. “You disagree?”

There were so many things I wanted to say – could have said that would break the wall of defense Anna was building up as we spoke, but I decided not to. I could feel the anger blooming inside me at the memories and knew this wasn’t an ideal time to let it all out.

I sighed. “I don’t want to get into it. I don’t want to start an argument now, so can we please just… not.”

Her mouth opened to talk, but she quickly clamped it back shut and managed a curt nod before she spun around again and continued to walk. We were silent until we got to the spot Patrick wanted us to be.

“Wow… it’s even more beautiful than I remembered,” she said as she looked at the vast expanse of lake water. It was similar to the view at Patrick’s with the mountainous ranges in the background, but the water was clearer here – so clear that you could see the bedrock beneath the water at the shoreline. But that wasn’t even the best part. It was the variety of winter flowers that bloomed around us, all in different colors, huddled together to create a beautiful bed.

“I see why it’s Patrick’s favorite spot.”

She nodded with a smile and glanced at the urn in my hand, her eyes softening. “So this is it?”

“This is it.”

I opened the container and walked closer to the edge, observing the direction of the wind. “You will be missed, old man. I will always be grateful to you for being there for me at my worst and my best. You made me believe all hope wasn’t lost in the world, and that I could do anything I wanted if I were passionate enough. I’ll miss you, but I’ll hold onto the memories,” I said as I glanced at an empathetic Anna and spilled the ashes. Some landed in the water before us, and the wind carried some before it disappeared. I cleared my throat in an attempt to rid myself of the lump that had begun to form.

I glanced at Anna and handed her the remains. She was already crying as she took it. “You were my anchor, the light I had to lead me in the darkness. My fondest memories were spent with you, and I can't

thank you enough for them. I love and miss you, but I know you're in a better place and if I'm lucky, I might see you again," she croaked before she sniffed and emptied the rest of the ashes into the lake. We both watched as the particles flew high before they were no more. For me, it indicated a finality that I had not allowed myself to grasp until now.

Anna started to sob, and I did the only thing I could have done in that moment. I reached for her and allowed her to cry against me while I tried to hold back my own tears. She felt so small and vulnerable in my hands – something new to me – and it prompted me to hold her even closer. She felt right in my arms as if here was where she belonged – with me. As she was being racked with sobs, I knew in my heart that she was my person. The burst of emotions that constricted my chest was mostly because she was sad more than anything else.

I didn't know what it was that led me to have this sudden train of thoughts, but I wanted to be there for Anna in moments like these. Be her shoulder to cry on – the person she went to when she was sad. Nothing else mattered more than holding her, and I didn't want to let go.

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Once we arrived back at the cabin, I already knew that it would start snowing soon, by the looks of it, and I had some things to take care of before it started.

"I'm gonna head to the bar for a bit. You could come for breakfast."

"Nah, I'm good. There were some leftovers, anyway. I think I'll have that."

I nodded, and our gazes met. "Ok, I'll be back soon. You'll be safe here. The bad guys only come out at night," I smiled, and she nodded.

I was about to turn in my tracks when I paused, hearing her call my name, and feeling her small hands wrapped around my wrist. I honestly wished she hadn't done that because it was like she had triggered something in me. Something primal and needy – craving to finish what we had started the other night. I swallowed and looked from my hand to her soft blue eyes.

"I'm glad you were there with me today. I don't know what I would have done if it were me alone."

I smiled. "I'm glad you were there too."

I couldn't take my eyes off her. Not when she looked so beautiful

with her hair down, framing her small, oval face. Her cheeks flushed from the cold. The woman was stunning, and I wanted her as much as I wanted the air I breathed.

Like a moth drawn to a flame, I gave into the attraction once again, stepping a little closer, watching as her small mouth parted in anticipation. Her scent filled me with longing, and I stood directly in front of her, taking in it all. I lowered my head to her, and she tipped a little to meet me as our mouths crashed against each other. My body instantly remembered the taste and feel of her cotton-soft lips – the sweetness. The memory ran hot through my veins, and I was in paradise for the second time when my tongue caressed hers and melted the chills in my body. I pulled her against me, scouring the contents of her sweet mouth while my hand traced up her slender back, resting at her neck where I held her firmly in place. She moaned against me, and the vibrations rang through my body like an electric force.

My pants started to tighten as my length expanded and sought release. I was right at her stomach and knew she could feel me against her the longer we kissed. To my surprise, it seemed she even tried to wiggle closer to get a better experience of my erection against her. She started to tug at my buckle while I kissed her like her mouth had endless treasures.

I could feel how much she wanted me, and I hoped she could feel the same energy radiating from me. I peeled off her coat and threw it to the side, exposing the tight blouse underneath that clung to her skin and imprinted her hardened nipples.

Gosh, Anna was everything, something I couldn't get enough of, no matter how I tried. My hands traveled up her own, but I paused when my fingers hit a small bump that interrupted the flawlessness of her supple skin. She gasped, and I pulled back to look at her and her arm.

It was a small scar that went wide across her arm. "What happened here?" I was curious to know, especially seeing the expression that took over her face and how she tried to pull the sleeve down to cover it.

"It's nothing," she said as she reached for her coat, but I recognized the sudden edge to her voice and knew that it was definitely something.

"Seemed like the injury was pretty bad."

She raised a brow. "I guess you could say that," she said as she adjusted the coat and looked at everything except me.

I sighed, feeling a little frustrated. "Anna, I'm trying here. The least

you could do is meet me halfway."

She stared at me for a long second before she scoffed and shook her head. "We don't have to do anything, Carter. In a day or two, I will be gone. Maybe our heads are a little fuzzy with emotions, but we both hate each other at the end of the day!" she snapped.

I was taken aback by her harsh words but knew there was some truth in them. "I don't hate you."

She seemed taken off guard by my response but quickly shook her head as if to clear it. "Well, you might have evolved from the person you were in high school, but I definitely can't forget what you put me through."

I scoffed. Here we go again! "I told you I was sorry for all that. I was stupid and was looking for someone to blame for my problems. I didn't think it was that big of a deal. It was high school!" I exclaimed.

Her little nostrils flared, her mouth set in a pout, and the softness in her eyes from earlier was long gone. "Part of the reason I hated this place so much was because of you. I lived in fear for most of my time because I didn't know what you would say or do to me!"

I swallowed. "I never laid a finger on you, and neither did I plan to. I never would."

"You never did, but when I stood up to you for the first time, I was scared out of my mind especially after you threatened me. I ran from you because I believed you when you said you wouldn't regret what you would do if I didn't run. This scar on my arm was from running from you!" she spat, tears now streaming down her flushed face. I didn't dare say a word because I was too shocked.

"So you might think it was nothing but the usual bullying, but I hated you for most of my life because of it."

I couldn't meet her gaze. I was too ashamed to do anything but hang my head. I remembered the day as clear as day. How she had shamed my family and the town. At the time, I was shocked that she was standing up to me, but nothing beat the anger that had coursed through me. I threatened her because I couldn't bear to look at her, but I knew I would never lay a finger on her, no matter how angry I was.

"I'm sorry – I didn't know. I'm sorry I put you through all that, Anna," I said, finally managing to look at her.

"Why, though? Why me? I didn't do anything to you. I don't even remember having a conversation with you before the bullying," she said. "It was like you got up and decided that you would make my life

hell."

I swallowed as I contemplated telling her my truth. It was something I hoped would stay buried forever because I never wanted to relive the moment, but how long could I at this point?

"I hated you because I hated your dad," I blurted.

She scoffed. "What did my dad ever do to you people? I don't get it. All he tried to do was help and make something of this dump!" she snapped.

That familiar anger started to slowly grow inside me again. "You're so blind to everything, aren't you? It's high time you take your family off that pedestal you have them on because they are far from saints!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, fuck you, Carter!" she said as she turned to leave.

"Why do you think he picked up and left Greenvale?" I called, and she paused in her tracks before confidently turning around to confront me.

"The refinery wasn't profiting!"

I scoffed. "And you believed that? There was a Benzene exposure because your dad was busy running shortcuts. My dad was exposed and found out a year later that he had cancer. Your dear old dad did nothing to help, even when he still continued to work with the diagnosis. He couldn't stop because he wanted to care for me and pay his medical bills. Your dad said it wasn't the factory's fault that he got cancer, but then two more persons became ill with the same cancer."

Anna's eyes were wide, her face pale as she listened to me.

"They wanted to lawyer up, fight the matter in court, but none of the lawyers they could afford wanted to go up against Sylas Cambridge. Then he picked up and left because he was a coward who didn't want to face up to his responsibilities. And my dad died because of it."

She still didn't say anything, but I imagined she was processing all that I was telling her, which was warranted because this was a lot.

"I was angry for a very long time, and because I couldn't get to your father, I let it out on you."

Her lips trembled as she stared at me. "My dad would never-"

"If you don't believe him, ask him yourself. He knows the truth," I said before sidestepping her and leaving the house. Whatever conclusions she wanted to draw from what I told her was up to her.

Chapter 6

Anna

Carter left me with a pill that I had difficulty swallowing even an hour later. He had left for the bar, and I was still here with tears streaming down my face because I couldn't begin to fathom his words being true. But surely, this was something he couldn't make up. I wanted to put my mind at ease, and so I fished out my phone and dialed my dad's number because I couldn't wait until I got back to the city to confront him.

"Anna?" he answered, probably shocked that I called, seeing I hadn't done so in a while.

"I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to give me the honest truth, nothing less," I said and was happy with the firmness in my voice, although I was slowly crumbling on the inside.

"Of course. What is the matter, sweetheart."

"Why did we leave Greenvale?"

There was a bit of hesitance on his end before he said, "Honey, I told you, it wasn't working out. It cost too much..."

My lips quivered. "People's lives?"

"What?'

"Was the refinery giving people cancer because you were too cheap to follow proper protocols?" I asked.

"Anna, where did you –"

"I asked for the truth, Dad!" I snapped as tears flowed down my face.

The line went silent. "There was an exposure, yes." His voice was low, and I knew right away that he was guilty.

"You could have easily footed their medical bills and made it better. What kind of person are you?" I sobbed, feeling myself shake.

"Anna, I-"

"You are a horrible dad, but I still defended you against these people who were right all along!" I shouted. "This is the last time you'll be hearing from me! You're dead to me as of today." Without waiting to hear a reply from him, I hung up the phone and pulled my knees to my chest and started sobbing.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that my dad was guilty and

that I had foolishly defended him. I had spent the better part of my life hating Carter because I thought he was being the typical high school antagonist with no real reason behind his bullying. But he was in pain, battling with things far greater than I had to deal with. As hard as it was to do, I understood his reasons – why he did it and why he was so angry at me.

I was innocent in the matter, but I understood. I understood it now, but I hated the unintentional hurt and not knowing. I wanted to cry my eyes out… I felt so stupid and hurt all at once. For years, I had just accepted my father's lie and went along with it because it never crossed my mind that the issue would be so severe.

For the rest of the day, I felt like crap and quite frankly, I didn't know what I'd say to Carter when he came back. I should apologize because it was the right thing to do, although I doubt anything I did would fix the damage. His father was dead because of mine, for Christ's sake! How could I even look him in the eyes after this?

It started to snow later that day, so I went inside and huddled in bed after making myself some tea and snacking on some chips that had been left in the pantry.

I heard the door open later that evening and knew Carter had arrived. This feeling of anxiety took over as I dreaded the impending conversation. A few minutes passed while I listened to him shuffling around the house.

I almost gasped when a knock came at the door, accompanied by his bassy voice. "I brought dinner if you're hungry," he said and then there was silence again.

I felt that familiar burning in my throat, which was usually accompanied by tears. Despite what had happened, he was still managing to be kind. I didn't know whether to cry my eyes out at the chivalry or feel more guilty for what had happened. All this time, I'd been hating someone I thought was a monster when really, he had just been hurting.

I pulled in a breath, peeled myself off the bed and went to the small living room where Carter sat with the take-out bags in front of him while he scrolled on his phone. His hair was in a high ponytail that was a bit messy, and for the first time since I'd been here, he wasn't wearing flannel. Instead, he wore a white t-shirt that showed his strong arms even more.

He didn't look up even when I moved closer and took a seat beside him.

"You were right, and I'm sorry, Carter. I had no idea," I began.

“Nothing I say will make it better, but I’m deeply sorry for all you went through because of my father.”

He finally looked up at me. His features were soft, and so were his eyes, which seemed to glisten under the lights. “You called him.”

“I did; he tried to defend himself, but I knew he was lying. I just wished I’d known earlier.”

He shook his head. “I guess I should have told you back then. I just thought you were just like your father and you wouldn’t care for the truth. Either way, it’s no excuse for what I did to you all those years. I shouldn’t have bullied you, and I’m deeply sorry.”

I smiled. “Apology accepted. I guess we can stop hating each other now.”

He chuckled. “I stopped hating you a long time ago.”

I smiled and tucked a lock of loose hair behind my ear. We ate the food he brought and settled into light chatter until we both realized it was starting to snow harder.

“I’m gonna crank up the heat a bit more. It’s gonna be a cold night here.”

I cleaned up and opted for an extra blanket when Carter returned.

“Well, I’d better head to bed. It’s going to be a long night. Good night, Anna.”

“Good night, Carter.”

We went our separate ways; I flopped down in the bed with a sigh, staring at the blank ceiling as I listened to the howling wind outside. I was never a fan of the cold weather, so I had hoped that coming here would be sunny long enough until I got back home.

I pulled up the covers and shuffled around in the bed, knowing the night ahead would be reckless. All I could think about was Carter and that he was in the other room. It was harder now that I had no reason to hate him again. The kisses we shared started to plague me, and I grew even more reckless by the passing second. All I wanted to temper my chills was a warm body pressed against mine. Carter was more than capable of making that happen with his large, taut body.

I closed my eyes and huffed a sigh, but all I could see was the sexy, rugged beast who had managed to stir more emotions in me in one day than I had managed in years. I couldn’t believe it, but here I was, fantasizing about my former bully – wanting him more than I did anything else.

I even contemplated walking over to his room and offering myself

to him because I felt that needy. But I feared rejection more than anything, and there was a high possibility that Carter would if I made such a bold move. Or would he? I had felt how he kissed me and knew he wanted me as much as I wanted him. I could feel it in the way he kissed me – the way he held me against him – and, of course, how could I forget the way his boner had pressed against my stomach. Big and hard, ready to take me whichever way he could.

I twisted and turned in the small bed for hours until I decided to damn it all to hell. I swung my legs over and licked my lips as I stood, ready to do the boldest thing I had ever done in my life. I was in pajamas – the least sexy thing – but I knew I had to make it work.

I timidly walked from my room and went to where Carter was. My heart was beating a mile a second, but I couldn't dare turn back now. Not when I was so close. I swallowed the nervous lump in my throat and was happy to find that his door wasn't fully locked. I licked my lips and pushed the door open, feeling as if my heart was about to burst out of my chest any second now.

"Carter?" I said in the darkness, holding my breath.

The bedside lights were immediately flicked, on and there he was, shirtless in bed with his hair loose and brushing against his strong shoulders. He eased up and stared at me with a look of curiosity in his eyes – maybe wondering what the fuck I was doing in his room so late in the night.

"Anna, is everything okay?" he asked, voice slightly groggy.

I swallowed. "Er… I couldn't sleep." That was the truth after all, but the bigger question was, why?

There was a bit of realization in his eyes as they swept my form before settling on my face. Wordlessly, I moved towards him, and he scooted off the bed a little, so he was sitting at the edge in boxers. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I was never this bold or spontaneous, but here Carter was, bringing all of it out.

I stood before him and met his darkened gaze, licking across my lips. I wanted to kiss him so badly, but what if all this blew up in my face? What would I do then?

He swallowed, and his Adam's apple bobbed. "Are you sure this is what you want?" his voice was low and incredibly sexy, with a bit of huskiness that sent chills down my spine.

I nodded and folded my lips. We were both silent after, but then he reached out with his big muscular hands, wrapping them around my waist as he pulled me close. I almost gasped, but I took his reaction as

a sign to do what I had been craving for hours. I kissed him, and I kissed him hard, not holding back for even a second. Unlike the others, which had started sweet and soft, this was the complete opposite. This was pure need between two people, and I was burning with each stroke, each lick into my mouth, each possessive tug and nip that made up this kiss.

Carter's lips briefly left my mouth as he went to suckle on my sensitive neck. An erogenous zone that I had not even spoken about. Yet here he was, causing a river to flow within my panties the longer he kissed me there. I almost squealed when he started to suck on the flesh with his hot tongue. I didn't care if he left a mark – I was just living for every second of this amazing moment.

"Oh, yes," I whispered, arching my neck higher to grant him more access. He took the opportunity to suckle the spot needily while his hands traveled beneath my top and explored my heated flesh. I shivered against him as his hands traveled up both my sides, his thumb brushing against my tits.

"Fuck, your skin is like velvet," he stated huskily, moving further down my chest. I gasped, my knees almost giving out when he caught one nipple in his mouth through my clothes and tugged at it. The heat that seared through me was blinding, and I knew I was probably so wet that my juices would soon begin to slither down my legs. When he pulled away, a wet spot remained on the thin fabric. He smiled down at it, and I almost lost my mind at the whole thing.

"Hands up, sweetheart. I want my mouth against your flesh." The way he said it was like a demand that had my heart doing flips.

I held up my hands and allowed him to peel off my top, exposing my naked chest. He didn't go at it right away. He just took his time to admire each round swell of flesh with the lust building in his gaze. Somehow, despite his thorough inspection of me, I didn't feel self-conscious. I felt even more confident in myself because this man was looking at me like I was a prize he had just won.

When he finally reached out and took my breast in his mouth, I arched my neck and closed my eyes. Each breast fit perfectly in his mouth, and he smoothed his tongue along its perimeter until he sucked at the nipples, releasing them with a 'pop' when his mouth left them. He stroked each with his tongue with skillful accuracy, giving both just the right amount of licks before he suckled and wrapped them around his tongue. My hands were busy making streaks in his hair as he spent his time heightening my arousal.

When he was done with them, he knelt before me and peeled my pants off. I was in lacy blue underwear that he didn't waste any time

in shoving down my legs. He knelt in front of me on two knees like I was some God he was cherishing. My chest rose and fell as I anticipated his next move, but what he did next was something I had not seen coming.

He wrapped his arms around my hips and pulled me closer to him before he stuck out his tongue and licked across my vagina. I gasped when he picked me up in that same position and flopped me on the bed. My ass was barely at the edge of the bed, and he was still kneeling in front of me. I had closed my legs, but one look from him prompted me to open them.

I held my breath and watched the darkness that loomed in his eyes as he observed my heated flesh, which was probably glistening with wetness.

"You're so beautiful, Anna." Just the way he said my name caused my flesh to clench up in front of him, and heat immediately rose to my cheeks.

He held up my legs – pried them apart with his strong arms, and then he lowered his head to my most intimate flesh. I moaned and fell back on the bed when his warm mouth made contact with my skin. He moaned against me as he sucked on my sensitive flesh, lapping up my juices but creating more with his own. I started to writhe in the bed when he started to lick me with his strong tongue from top to bottom, flicking lightly at the hole before he went back up and repeated his actions. I was burning up… so, so hot as Carter did wonders to my flesh.

He found my tiny gape and decided that he would give it some attention. When he probed deep and began to flick it, I damn near lost my mind. I couldn't stop my moans or the movements of my body as I thrashed from side to side. Carter held my legs in place and didn't let up for even a second until I was screaming and shaking on the bed, my orgasm hitting me like a boulder.

"Oh, my gosh! Oh!" my voice even sounded hoarse – my body feeling drained. Yet, he still continued to bathe my flesh with his tongue, causing me to quiver over and over again. He finally got to his feet and licked his lips, looking like a God with his hair flowing and his muscular chest left to my hungry gaze.

Despite my mind-boggling orgasm, I felt myself wanting more. My eyes lowered to Carter's lower half, and I could see his manhood visibly straining against the fabric, creating a tent that pointed in my direction. I licked my lips, and he must have followed the direction of my gaze because he immediately hooked his fingers in the waistband and pulled off his boxers. His dick sprung free and bounced a little

before it settled, pulsing at me. I almost salivated for a taste.

"I want to taste you like you did me," I said and was happy my voice didn't break.

He ran his hand through his hair and climbed on the bed, leaning against the headboard. I crept up to him and settled between his spread legs, capturing his cock in my hand, which perfectly fitted my palms. It was huge and beautiful, and I had to briefly ponder whether or not he would fit.

However, I gave it little thought – more eager for a taste at this moment than anything else. I licked my palm and started to stroke him with it, slowly going up and down his length. He moaned throatily, and I continued, amping up my pace a little until I saw clear precum oozing from the tip. I used my thumb and spread it across the head before lowering my mouth over him and taking him inside. The tangy, slightly salty taste exploded in my mouth, but I enjoyed the feel of my tongue on his sensitive skin. My saliva pooled on him as I went back and forth in the sloppy blow-job. Carter moaned and reached for my head, massaging my scalp as I went down on him. It motivated me to move faster until he started to grunt and thrust his hips up, sending his length further into my throat. More saliva pooled on him, his moans becoming louder as I relentlessly blew him off.

"Fuck, Anna, I can't hold back," he warned. I upped my pace a little, pausing as he bucked and muttered a curse, his hot semen shooting at the back of my throat. My mouth remained over his head, collecting every drop until he was empty. I sucked him a little despite my full mouth and went all the way up the head before I finally emptied his semen back on his length.

"Oh, fuck!" Carter exclaimed as his cream coated his entire length.

I licked my lips and swallowed what I had left in my mouth, smiling shyly at him. He was still hard as a rock, his manhood still upright as it slightly throbbed.

"Damn, you're perfect. Come here," he said as he reached for me and clamped my mouth to his yet again. I kissed him hard, tasting myself on him just as he tasted himself on me.

The dusting of hair on his chest caressed my nipples as we kissed, almost tickling yet arousing me beyond measure. Carter's hands moved down my back until he reached my ass, squeezing each globe. I rolled my hips against him, his cock resting just below me. I wanted him so much; I couldn't wait a second more. I raised my ass and reached between us to capture his length. I met his gaze as I impaled myself on him, watching as his lips slowly parted as my flesh slowly

sheathed his.

I gasped as I lowered myself on his slick member, feeling incredibly full the farther he went. It almost became overwhelming as I took in his entire length, but I managed to do so without cumming at once. All the while Carter's hands were busy exploring my body, igniting little fires all over.

He kissed my open mouth, and I quivered at the shift in movement. He held me as I began to roll my hips on him, feeling him all the way inside me; it felt so good that I had to close my eyes for a second and bask in the amazing feeling.

"You feel so amazing," he said as he found my neck again and peppered it with hot kisses and licks. I moved against him, feeling the heat radiate from both our bodies as we made love. Carter held my hips and started to control my movements, pushing me back and forth on his steely length. I slid against him effortlessly, pleasure rippling through me with every stroke. I clung to him, wrapping my hands around his neck as I moved on him – the sounds of our body's connection creating rhythmic music inside the room.

I started to move faster as the pleasure started to build more and more within me. I didn't want the feeling to stop and sought more of it with each thrust, each tug on my skin. It was everything, and I was close – so incredibly close as I rode on my high. A scream bubbled up from inside me, which I tried to suppress, but the feeling was too intense.

My mouth fell open, and I could feel my flesh clamping down on him even as he continued to move within me. I screamed his name and threw my head back as a whirlwind of emotions crashed into me. I was quivering – my brain had gone completely putty…

But Carter wasn't done with me yet.

Carter

I'd never experienced pleasure so intense. Each stroke inside Anna was like bliss. I was on cloud nine as I slid back and forth into her. Her skin was soft and supple, and I could smell her sweet perfume that was almost an intoxicating smell mixed with the scent of sex in the room. When she came around me, I felt everything… there was nothing between us as she offered me all she had.

Her orgasm almost triggered my own, but I was hell-bent on holding out as long as I could because I didn't want this to end. Her

silky flesh hugged mine, clenching and unclenching as more of her juices sheathed my shaft. I held onto her and collected all her tremors, kissing along her open mouth, tracing my tongue along her sweaty nape.

Grabbing her hips, I held her and flipped her over on her back while I towered above her. Her hair was sprawled out behind her head, and her face was flushed – lips incredibly pink from my incessant kisses.

Her chest rose and fell, drawing my eyes to her erect nipples, which were like cherries resting on her small mounds. There was this eagerness in her eyes that told me that though she had orgasmed, she wanted more. That's my girl. She was possibly exhausted, but she wanted more of me inside her. Who was I to resist? I began my kisses again, starting at her collarbone and moving down her breasts. I saw the scar on her arm, and my stomach churned as I recollected the story she told me. It was all because of me, and I hated myself for it. It should have been enough of a buzzkill to soften my erection, but then Anna reached for me as if reading my thoughts and kissed me soulfully. I sucked and licked at her lips before I lowered myself and gave her neck the same treatment.

After the first kiss to her neck, I realized it was a soft spot. I enjoyed the moans that almost seemed automatic whenever I kissed her there and would live a lifetime doing just that to hear them over and over again. My kisses traveled to her arm, and I kissed the scar before I strayed to her tits. I would spend a lifetime kissing it and telling her how sorry I was for putting her through all that agony in high school.

"I want you again, Carter, please," an eager Anna whispered as she raised her hips to meet my body. I didn't hesitate for a second longer. I found her heat for the second time and muttered a curse when I slid all the way inside her.

There was an involuntary clench that made me move faster inside her. She was hot and soft and was like velvet as I moved. She started to mewl, grabbing onto my neck as she pulled me down on her body. Our slick bodies moved together, and as slow as I wanted to take it for Anna's sake, I couldn't hold back. I started ramming into her with sharp and hard thrusts that made the bed beneath us creak. Her moans got louder, she held me tighter, and I swore I would pass out

whenever I orgasmed.

“Oh, yes! Oh my God, Carter! Yes!” she repeatedly exclaimed as her flesh started to clench again.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” I managed before I bucked into her and paused, releasing my seed into her. It seemed endless; the pleasure soaring through me was almost crippling as I pumped loads inside her. She collected every drop with a quiver until I collapsed beside her, totally spent and unbelievably satisfied.

Chapter 7

Anna

I woke up to a sweet ache between my legs and Carter's big arms wrapped around my waist. He was still fast asleep, and I could tell by the gentle snores and the heaviness in his hands. I shuffled away a bit and took his hands up before gently placing them on the bed. He slept so peacefully – features completely at ease with his hair tousled, but it was probably the sexiest thing. I contemplated staying just to be in his arms a little longer, but the stickiness between my thighs reminded me that I needed to shower.

I got off the bed and went in search of my scattered clothes before I quickly padded to the bathroom. Each sweet ache from the result of every movement made me smile. I could definitely get used to this – to the idea of waking up with Carter every day. No man had ever made me feel like this. No man had ever given such a stellar performance in bed. He definitely had the whole package.

I took a quick shower and went to my room, where my phone immediately started to ring. I knew it was Maria without even giving it a second thought, and it actually was.

I smiled. "Heeyyy!"

"Well, someone is in a chipper mood. Care to tell your best friend what happened?" she prodded.

I bit my lips and nibbled on a nail for a second. "I'm not."

"Anna, you sound like a morning person right now, and you're definitely not one. It's not even eight," she acknowledged with a little bit of chirpiness in her voice.

Of course, Maria could tell. I sighed as I sat on the bed. "I slept with Carter," I blurted.

There was a small pause before she said, "Carter, as in the guy who bullied you throughout high school?!"

"Yeah," I almost squeaked out.

"OMG, what the hell? How did that even happen?"

"It just kinda did. We kinda figured things out," I said as I rubbed at my jaw and smiled.

“Oh, my gosh, so how was it?”

I immediately felt the heat rising to my cheeks. “Amazing! Out of this world,” I said, lowering my voice a bit as I looked to the door.

“Damn, I need all the details when you get back!”

“Of course.”

“But I guess what I’m about to tell you is gonna put a damper on this, and I’m so sorry!”

The smile dropped from my face. “Mar, what is it?”

“Hector came by the apartment and was going on about you not replying to his texts and that he needed to talk to you. He said he really wanted to talk to you, and, of course, I didn’t tell him where you were, but then he kinda got insanely nagging, and I feared it could be serious, so I told him you were in Greenvale,” she sighed.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, my gosh,” I said as I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it, though; it’s not like Hector will hop on a plane to come see me,” I snorted.

“Thing is, that’s exactly what I think he’s going to do. He seems desperate and seems to have this big apology lined up.”

I rolled my eyes. “Doesn’t matter. I might be back by tomorrow, anyway. I’ll text him and tell him not to.”

“Ok, good, but if he tries to worm his way back into your life, don’t let him. You deserve better,” she warned.

“I won’t.”

“You always had a soft spot for him, Anna.”

I rubbed the nape of my neck. “True, but I've had time to think these past few months, and I was really doing myself a disservice by being with Hector, anyway.”

Maria giggled on the other end. “The last two months or last night when you realized he was crap in bed all this time.”

I blurted out a laugh, instantly slapping my hand over my mouth. “Shut up; Hector was good in bed too.”

“But didn’t hold a candle to Carter, right?” she prodded.

I bit my lips. “I’m not talking about this with you right now.”

“Right, you have to get back in bed for some delicious morning

sex," she exclaimed dramatically.

"Oh, my gosh, you're the worst. Goodbye, I'll talk to you later."

Maria laughed. "Ok, goodbye, my little nymph."

I was grinning as I rolled my eyes and disconnected the call, sighing heavily. I immediately texted Hector on Instagram and told him that flying out to Greenvale wouldn't be necessary. As a man who was a social media presence and was always online, he wasn't now.

What was he thinking anyway? Did he think he could just dump me and get me back whenever he pleased? I'd cried non-stop for over a week after our breakup, but after, I had actually gotten time to clear my head of him. Yes, I still stalked his Instagram to see what he was up to, but now more than ever, I was clear that I didn't want him back.

"Hey, you weren't trying to run from me, were you?" I looked up to find Carter at the door with a towel draped around his waist while he leaned against the doorpost.

I smiled as my eyes consumed the length of his sexy body, and I could feel the heat rising in my body again. "Nah, I just had to take a call." He approached me and pulled me against him, my small body pressed against him.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, his forehead wrinkled.

"Yeah, everything is fine."

"Great, I'm gonna take a shower, and then I'm going to make us some breakfast."

I smiled. "Sounds perfect," I said, and he kissed me softly before he pulled away and left the room.

I bit my lips and watched as he left before I plopped back down on the bed with a sigh. Leaving would be hard; I could see that now that I knew that Carter was becoming addicting. Just his mere presence had caused my heart to flutter and my stomach to churn. I also knew I had been blushing with the heat that warmed my cheeks as soon as he touched me. How could I leave this all behind when he had managed to make me feel like a new person in one night?

I went back to his room and made the bed, my memories becoming more vivid with every piece of linen I touched.

Fifteen minutes later, Carter was out of the shower with his hair in a wet bun at the top of his head. His stubble had grown out a little more, making him a little rugged, along with a red flannel that he threw on. He had a few more buttons loose this time, showing off a little of the hair on his taut chest. He went to the kitchen and started to prepare eggs and pancakes, which were ready in no time.

I dug in first because I was famished, especially after going rounds last night. “Where did you learn to cook like this?” I asked as I cut into the pancake.

“YouTube, and then I just kind of experimented with a few things after,” he said.

“These are literally the best pancakes I’ve ever had.”

“Thanks.”

“The linguine was great too. I mean, you could make good money in the big cities, and there would be more opportunities, too,” I said as I ate.

“Sounds like someone’s going to miss me when they’re gone,” he grinned, raising a brow.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself. But I’m serious; have you ever thought about leaving Greenvale?”

“Not really; Greenvale has always been my home. I wouldn’t want to change that.”

I nodded slowly, knowing that even if I wanted Carter for a little longer, he wouldn’t move to be with me. His heart was set here, which further confirmed this would be a fling and nothing else. There was no future for us when our hearts were in different places.

“How about you? What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m an HR manager for a cosmetics company.”

“Wow, that’s impressive.”

“Says the guy who owns his own bar.”

He gave a nonchalant shrug. “Yours take a lot of brainpower.”

I smiled and bit my lips. “I just realized I didn’t even ask you if you had a girlfriend,” I geeked.

“Do you think last night would have happened if I did?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. You don’t seem like the committed type.”

His mouth fell open as he laughed. “Oh, wow, well, sorry to break the news to you, sweetheart, but I am.”

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“Way to keep the excitement going,” he winked, and I felt it all the way to my stomach.

“My ex-fiancé was somewhat of the same. Unpredictable in every sense until he dumped me out of the blue,” I said with a dry laugh.

“His loss.” Our eyes locked, and I bit my lips as I stared at him.

“How long do you think it’ll keep snowing?” I cleared my throat and asked.

“Maybe for the rest of the day.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

He looked at me with a familiar glint in his eyes. “You.”

***

I raised my hips a little and moaned into the bedsheets as Carter kissed a trail up my back, spending a little time at my neck before he kissed my cheeks. His hand slipped under me to grab one of my tits at the same time he slid into me. I gasped at the delicious intrusion and gripped the sheets as he started to move slowly against my ass. His breath was hot against my neck, and so was his body against mine as he rocked in and out of me. He moved at a controlled pace for a few minutes until I started to clench against him and heard the way his groans became more guttural.

His pace increased as he eased up off me, placing his hands on my hips where he held them in place and started to thrust inside me at a wilder pace. I shimmied a little on the bed, wanting to spread my legs a little because he felt too big, and I was on the threshold of pain and pleasure in this position. But Carter had me pinned beneath him, moving more erratic to the point where I almost became overwhelmed.

“Oh, my …ahh!” my words were muffled in the bedsheets, my head spinning as I tried to make sense of the emotions overriding me.

He started to spread my cheeks with his hands, and I’m guessing the sight must have been something because he immediately muttered a curse and went even faster. At this point, my moans were loud and pleading as my body neared a release. But each time I moved closer to cloud nine, I came back down when he slowed his pace.

“Please.” Frustration began to take a toll on me, and I feared I would pass out from the sheer pleasure and agony of it all. “Please, I need to cum…”

He upped his pace again at the simple demand, and I squealed when I got to the point of no return. I quivered, my flesh clenching around him as he stroked me with powerful thrusts. I screamed into the sheets and clamped my eyes shut as I rode the waves of my orgasm and came back down to find that Carter was still not there.

Two more thrusts from him, and I was quivering again, hit by another orgasm. But this time, he bucked and dug deeper into my skin before he quickly pulled out and slathered his seed all over my ass.

“I swear you’re fucking perfect, Anna. So beautiful,” he said between breaths as he rolled me over and kissed me like his life depended on it. I kissed him back in my state of bliss, knowing there was no way I could leave Greenvale and not have Carter with me.

Chapter 8

Carter

I was over the moon, and I didn't know if it were the sex or I was falling for Anna every second of the day. Every inch of her body was mine – every inch explored for hours on end. I couldn't get enough. She was a drug, and I was an addict who sought more constantly. Just when I thought I'd had enough, she would smile or do something that set me ablaze again.

How was this even possible? Compared to the start we had, this was a miracle. We had warmed up to each other and had spent the last day getting more familiar with each other's body while the snow fell, giving us more reasons to stay trapped inside.

But today, there was no snow and a hint of sun in the sky. I was somewhat disappointed because I knew this would come to an end very soon. Anna had to return to work, and her flight was already booked. It was all finalized while I was there, dreading every moment. The thought of having her gone was painful – the idea of never seeing her again was something I never thought would make me so sad. All of a sudden, it was like I couldn't live without Anna Cambridge.

She came out of the shower with a robe wrapped around her while she mussed up her wet hair. She smiled at me, and her glow was just so beautiful. She was like a ray of sunshine in this gloomy place.

"Wanna drive me to the airport later on?" she asked as she came over and straddled my lap. I moaned as I pulled her in and gave her a small kiss on the lips.

"I wish you didn't have to leave," I groaned, nuzzling her neck.

"Then come with me," she said.

I chuckled at the offer. "To your big city? Are you saying that you like me?" I teased, and her cheeks ripened with a blush.

"Maybe just a little bit."

I grinned. "Not too loud. You might cause a blizzard after that statement."

She swatted me playfully. "I'm serious, though; you can come to New York. You're great at what you do and will be on your way to

success in no time."

I licked across my lips, knowing that Anna wasn't the type of person to come right out and say she wanted to be with me, but the feeling was bittersweet.

"I can't just pick up and leave my life behind, Anna," I said. She got up off me, and damn, I knew it was only good while it lasted.

"I don't get why you're so obsessed with this place!" she exclaimed with a dry laugh. "You'd rather stay here and be in your comfort zone than go out there and experience life for a change!"

"Or maybe I'm just happy with my life as it is!" I bit back.

"What life?" she scoffed. "You may have turned out better than most people here, but living like this gets old fast."

I shook my head. "I'm not having this conversation with you," I said as I got up and attempted to go anywhere but here, but then I paused and turned to her, feeling there was something I needed to get off my chest first. "You know, for as long as you've lived here, you never once complimented this place. You always saw everyone as less than you and never thought this place was anything other than a piece of dump!"

"I never looked down on anyone here!" she defended fiercely, her green eyes wide as she stared at me.

"Really? Have you ever stopped to listen to yourself? You have no faith in this place or the people!"

"One of the most important persons in my life was from here."

"And he might have been the only one you truly saw!"

"Because you made most of it hell for me!" she spat.

I clenched my teeth. "I've spent the last day apologizing and telling you how sorry I am for putting you through that. Whether or not you want to believe me is up to you at this point. I'm done." I moved past her, seeing the tears glisten in her eyes and feeling guiltier than ever, but I was too angry to stop – to apologize again or make this better. Maybe there was no happily ever after with Anna and me.

I was packing my overnight bag, ready to leave as soon as I got the chance, when I heard her name being called from the outside.

Curious more than ever because I didn't recognize the voice, I got up and moved towards the door, almost bumping into Anna, who had a mostly shocked expression on her face. Without a word, she moved toward the door and opened it. A tall, slender man was on the other side, wearing a beanie and a coat while he shivered in the wind. For a brief second, he looked at Anna, and I could see his hazel eyes soften with relief, but then he spotted me and the expression on his face became as cold as the snow outside.

"Hector, what are you doing here?" Anna exclaimed, her face gone pale at the sight of him.

"I came to see you, of course. You weren't answering any of my texts."

"I told you not to bother because I was leaving soon. What are you doing?" she asked with an obvious edge to her voice, which told me she was annoyed, but it didn't take long for me to figure out that Hector was the ex-fiancé.

Hector's eyes lifted to my face, Anna's, and then to mine again. Obviously, this guy wanted an introduction that none of us was willing to give.

"Can we talk, please?"

She folded her arms and glanced at me through the corners of her eyes. "Come in."

I stepped aside, feeling a little angry and jealous that this guy just barged in, ready to stake his claim. I was about to head to the bedroom, thinking it was none of my business, when I paused at the sound of Hector's voice.

"Anna, mind introducing me?"

I stepped forward and extended my hand. I managed a smile that seemed to creak at the edges as I stared at Hector. "Hi, I'm Carter, Anna's…friend." Hector took my hand and nodded slowly as his gaze trailed across my face. He then looked to Anna, a visible clench to his teeth as he managed a smile similar to mine.

"Oh, I didn't know Anna had friends here," he said, looking between us.

I turned to Anna and raised a brow. She shot me a glare that could have killed me on the spot if looks could kill, but I decided to play

with fire for a bit longer. “We go way back.”

Hector’s brows shot up. “Oh, Anna never mentioned you,” he said, his eyes twitching a little.

“I could say the same,” I smirked.

Anna stepped between us, turning to me with a warning in her mesmerizing green eyes. “Could you give us a minute, please?”

There was the little pout in place that I didn’t even know she was cognisant of. It almost made me smile, but the feelings storming through me at the moment couldn’t warrant such an action. I gritted my teeth and looked behind her at Hector, who had his brows furrowed as he tried to make sense of the situation.

I gave a curt nod and excused myself as I continued to pack. There was little I could hear, but some things I could make out from where I was.

“I heard about Patrick; I’m sorry.”

“Thanks, but you need to tell me what you’re doing here.”

“I realized I made a big mistake letting go of you, and trust me, Anna, I would do anything for another chance,” he said, and I gritted my teeth.

“It’s been two months. While you were busy realizing the mistake you made by ending things, I was busy getting over you.”

I almost smiled.

“I know deep down you still love me, and with just another try, we can be what we used to…”

“Hector-”

His voice lowered to a hushed whisper, and there was nothing else I could hear but faint mumblings, but the conversation was lengthy, and that probably wasn’t a good sign for me. The idea of her warming back up with her ex caused me more inner turmoil than I could have anticipated. I was on edge, my palms went sweaty at the possibility of Anna reigniting an old flame. But what chance did I have against this bum, anyway? He knew her better than me – they had history, which wasn’t a nightmare like the one we had.

But I couldn’t picture her with someone else. I couldn’t stand the thought of her wrapped in another man’s arms, giving her smile to

someone else – her body. The feeling was like a dagger to the heart.

I've never been so conflicted in my life – all for a woman who came into my life a few days ago and flipped it around in the best possible way.

A few minutes later, the door was pushed in, and Anna's face came into view. She couldn't meet my gaze for one second, and I guess that was enough of an answer for me.

"I'm leaving with Hector."

I clenched my teeth as the world crashed into me – as the thing I had feared the most became a reality. Anna had made her choice, and it wasn't me. Of course, it wasn't. I wasn't good enough for her, and she knew that as much as I did.

"Okay," I managed, my voice a little hoarse.

She stood there for a couple more seconds before she finally said, "You can have the house. There's obviously nothing left for me here." And then she was gone before I could even react.

I wanted to run after her, tell her that I wanted her with everything I had within me. I wanted to tell her that we could make this work and figure something out, but I knew it was a reach. We were just two people who were good in bed… that's all.

But somehow, my heart had something else to say.

***

Two days after Anna left, nothing seemed the same. It was as if I had found the missing piece in my life, and it was gone again now that she was. My nights were restless because all I wanted was her body on mine, snuggled up against me while I took in lung fills of her sweet scent. I was back home, and my bed was cold while she continued to plague my mind with her sweet memories.

But she made her choice, and I had to accept that and get her out of my head no matter how hard. I couldn't fit into Anna's idea of life, and I probably couldn't be with someone who hated the place I loved with all my heart. But could I even blame her for hating the place when her experience here was mostly hell because of me? Her throwing it in my face when I thought we had gotten past it was even worse.

“You look like shit,” Andrew scoffed as he pulled up a chair around the counter.

“Thanks,” I replied dryly.

“I heard Cambridge went back to the big city.”

“She did.”

“I thought you’d look happier.”

“Well, I’m not exactly in a mood,” I said as I filled his cup with his much-loved beer.

“Don’t tell me you fell in love with the minx,” he laughed.

“Don’t be silly.”

“I saw the way you looked at her.”

“It doesn’t even matter at this point. She is back home, and I’m where I need to be. Simple.”

“Something tells me you want to be with her,” he said as he raised a brow and drank his beer.

“We don’t always get what we want in life, do we, Andrew?”

“It doesn’t hurt to try.”

“I can’t just pick up and leave my life behind-”

“Why the hell not?!” he exclaimed. “This place has nothing to offer but fresh air!”

I rolled my eyes. “What’s wrong with you people thinking Greenvale is trash?” I snapped.

“It’s not exactly Dubai, bro. I’d choose a pretty woman and good pussy anytime over this place,” he said, choking up a laugh.

I shook my head and continued to wipe the washed glasses.

“The only time Greenvale ever had some hope was when the Cambridge’s came, and then that turned out to be the biggest shit show ever. All I’m saying is, the town needs a little work, and until someone is willing to come along with big pockets to change that, it isn’t worth it,” he shrugged. “You find a girl like Anna Cambridge in your lifetime, man, you fucking chase her until she stops. Life is too fucking short not to take the risk.”

I stared at Andrew as he drank his beer. By morning, he would probably forget ever saying any of this to me, but I knew it would

stick with me for a lifetime because it was definitely food for thought.

Chapter 9

Anna

"Are you sure you're okay?" Maria asked, a look of concern and pity on her face.

"Come on, Mar, you've asked me the same question a dozen times."

"And each time you've provided me with answers that are far from the truth," she defended as she shot up a brow.

"How do you know they're not the truth?"

"Because I know you!"

I huffed out a breath. "Fine, I am not okay, but it's pointless to miss a man who probably doesn't even feel the same way about me."

'You don't know that."

"Well, he isn't here, is he? Carter will never leave Greenvale," I said as I shook my head and reached for the tub of ice cream on the coffee table.

"You've got to give him more credit than that. People can surprise you."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm a little tired of surprises at this point. I just want to move on with my life, like he's obviously doing right now."

"It doesn't help that you left the cabin hand in hand with Hector. I mean, what's the guy supposed to think?"

"I didn't-" I sighed. "Hector and I aren't together. I was just angry with Carter and wanted to leave. He didn't put up a fight when he saw me leaving."

"Okay, so maybe you both should swallow your pride for a sec, but there's no point in being here moping all the time when you could get his number, call him and tell him how you feel," she said before she walked off, leaving me there with nothing but my thoughts.

I shook my head and jammed the spoon in the tub of ice cream as if it were the cause of my frustrations. It was stupid to expect Carter to come chasing after me, anyway. After all, we had never discussed feelings or a future and the closest we came to that it started a fight.

I should never have asked him to come to New York; I should have just accepted that what we had was just a short fling and nothing else. There was no future for us. Carter was in one place, and I was in another, plain and simple, but why was I missing him so much? Sure, the sex had been great, but something else made my heart flutter whenever I thought of him, and surely it was insane, seeing we had just been together for less than a week, but there was no doubt there was something else there… something that now made me feel incomplete.

***

A month had passed since my visit to Greenvale. I was in a new apartment, and was finally moving on with my life. Even though I still couldn't stop thinking about Carter, I would get over him eventually. Just as I did Hector, who was still fighting for a chance in my life. There was just no getting back together with him. Hector's chapter in my life was over. I still wished I could swallow my pride and get in touch with Carter, but I couldn't force a man to do something he didn't want to do. He was obviously happy in Greenvale, and there was nothing I could do to change that. It was just not meant to be.

I shuffled out of bed, but I could feel bile rise to my throat as soon as I did. Slapping my hands over my mouth, I ran to the bathroom to spill the contents of my stomach into the toilet bowl. I suddenly felt weak and nauseous as I sat on the floor, trying to regain my strength. As soon as I tried to get up, the feeling came again, and I found myself heaving even more.

Ten minutes later, I finally got hold of myself when the feeling started to fade. I groaned as I made my way to the bedroom and lay in the bed, trying to figure out where this feeling came from. Yesterday, I was fine, and today, it felt like I was going to die. I hadn't even eaten anything out of the norm, so I was a bit puzzled as to why I was feeling like this. There was one explanation at the back of my mind, but the very thought made me feel like throwing up all over again.

It couldn't be possible! My stomach churned at the possibility of pregnancy. It had to be something else. No matter how many times I tried to convince myself it was something else, it returned to this. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach but was scared to think of such

a thing. I had been on birth control.

Wanting to ease my mind, I got up and searched through a small box with random things from my last apartment. I had bought two pregnancy tests once when I had a scare with Hector and had only used one when it turned out negative.

My hands started to shake as I took the stick and headed for the bathroom. It felt like I had run a marathon with the way my heart was beating fast. I was breathless as I waited for the results, sweat beading on my forehead as I waited for the time to pass.

After five minutes, my palms were sweaty, and I was scared more than ever to look down on the stick. Somehow, I knew before I even looked that it would be positive. It was just a feeling I had, and when I finally looked, it was confirmed.

I gasped as I stared at the two bright lines and felt my lips tremble as tears flowed from my eyes. The feeling was bittersweet because I'd always wanted a child, but on the other hand, it was with a man who I wasn't even sure I'd see again. There was no way I could tell him this when I didn't even know if he wanted kids. Would he even believe me? I could feel myself spiraling the longer I thought about it. There were so many questions, and yet not enough answers.

My eyes were puffy when I stopped crying, but I managed to take a shower and get myself something to eat before I dragged myself to bed again. As soon as I was about to lie down, a knock came at the door.

I was in no mood for company but figured it was Maria, which was probably a good thing, seeing I needed some support right now.

I pulled on a robe and dragged myself to the door, but the person standing there was not my best friend.

I could feel the blood drain from my face when I laid eyes on Carter.

He was here, and he looked more handsome than ever. His stubble had grown out to a medium beard, and his hair was even taller as it hung past his shoulders.

"Ca-Carter, what are you doing here?" I said in what sounded like a whisper.

He took a hand from behind him and presented a bouquet with a

smile on his face. “I er – I wasn’t sure which one you liked, so I got a little of everything,” he said.

I bit the inside of my lips to stop them from shaking as I acknowledged the beautiful flowers in front of me. I felt as if I were going to swoon, and I didn’t know whether it was because I was still exhausted from spilling my guts or seeing him again.

I took the flowers. “Thank you, but why are you here?” I swallowed.

He looked over my shoulder. “May I come in? This doesn’t seem like the right place to talk.”

It took me a second to process before I stepped to the side to allow him entry. He ducked under the doorpost and walked to the living area.

“Have a seat. How did you even find me?” I asked as I put the flowers down and took a seat.

“I er… I found your address in one of Patrick’s journals.”

“I always told him that whenever he wanted to visit the Big City, he’d know where to find me.”

Carter nodded and placed his elbows on his knees as he looked at me. “I’ve had some time to think these past weeks, Anna – to really think about what I wanted for myself and my life, and certain things have become clear.”

I swallowed as I listened to him, my heart galloping in my chest.

“I know you and your ex are probably back together, but I didn’t want to let more time pass without telling you how I feel. I’ve never felt more alive than I did when I had you by my side. You made everything seem better, and I only realized how big of a mistake I’d made by not telling you sooner…”

My eyes became foggy, a single tear hanging on my lash as it awaited a blink to fall. “Carter…”

“You don’t have to feel the same, but I don’t want to live life knowing I never tried. I love you, Anna.”

The tears finally fell at his words, and my heart did a double flip in my chest as I looked at him and saw that he meant every word. I wanted to tell him I loved him, too, but so many other things needed to be sorted out. We weren’t on the same page with a lot of things.

I sniffed. “Hector and I aren’t together. I told him no before I left the cabin,” I confessed and his face visibly lit up, his whiskey-colored eyes wide. “But we have different views, Carter; your heart is in Greenvale, and mine is here. There’s no way it would work.”

He briskly moved to sit beside me, holding my hands as he stared into my eyes. “I’d gladly move to the end of the earth as long as you’re by my side. I realize that now. I can have someone manage the bar there while I find something else here. I have it all figured out, Anna. Just tell me you’ll have me.”

More tears streamed down my face as I listened to him. My heart was bursting with joy, and all I wanted to do was throw my hands around him and kiss him, but it wasn’t fair to expect him to do all this for me, was it?

“I can’t ask you to do that. It was unfair of me to expect you to pick up and leave everything behind,” I cried.

His hands tightened in mine as he held my gaze. “All I want is right here, right now.”

I managed a smile and was about to do what I was desperately craving to do for weeks – kiss him, but then the breakfast rose to my throat, and I had to rush to the bathroom to empty it. I prayed that Carter wouldn’t follow me, but as soon as I flushed, he was at the door, looking down at me with wide eyes and an open mouth as his face changed into one of pure concern.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he came in and peeled me off the floor and into his arms. I realized the test was still sitting on the counter from earlier, and as soon as I spotted it, so did he.

He stiffened against me, and I paused as I watched the series of emotions play across his face. He looked to the stick and then at me repeatedly before his gaze finally settled on mine for answers.

“Is…Is this real?” he asked, searching my eyes.

I nodded.

“Whose… Is it mine?” his voice cracked, his eyes glistening.

I sniffed and nodded. “Yes.”

He didn’t react right away. It was as if he hadn’t processed the information right away, but when he did, he choked up a laugh and placed one hand over his mouth as he looked to the stick again. I

couldn't help but smile at the evident joy on his face. The way he pulled me tighter against him and hugged me.

"I just found out this morning," I told him while inhaling his scent, feeling at home.

He held my face in his palms. "Were you planning on telling me if I hadn't shown up here?" he asked.

"Of course, I just didn't know how, but I would."

He smiled from ear to ear, each pearly white in perfect view. "You have no idea how happy you've made me," he said, kissing me. I kissed him back, feeling so much lighter than I had felt hours ago. There were so many things that we had to talk about now, but all that mattered was that Carter was by my side.

"I love you, too," I said, and his hold tightened on me.

I brushed my teeth and went back to the bedroom to find him seated at the end of the bed, smiling when he saw me.

My stomach churned as I looked at him, but it wasn't from nausea. It was that I felt everything just by looking at him. I slowly moved across the room, and he stood – our eyes never leaving each other. I stood before him while my heart beat like drums in my chest. My eyes trailed across the wide expanse of his chest – drinking in every muscle that was imprinted, the small bits of hair exposed beneath the opened buttons. I swallowed as I raised my hand and slid it along his neck, using my thumb to caress his skin.

He didn't say anything; he just kept looking at me with undeniable lust in his darkened eyes. The atmosphere became thick as we stood there, breathing in each other. I wanted him so badly that it took everything within me to go slow, but I wanted to take note of every single part of Carter. Plant him in my memory.

I started to unbutton his shirt, dropping it to the floor as I came in contact with his beautifully sculpted body. I then reached for his buckle and pulled down his pants, giving it the same treatment.

He stood naked in front of me, just watching me watch him. I licked my lips, almost salivating at the sight of him. Every single inch of his body was hard, including his cock, which throbbed between us. My body was on fire – the room felt congested as I refrained from jumping Carter.

I placed a hand on his chest and dragged my hand across his bulky pecs and his hard six-pack. I circled him as my hand continued to slide across his skin while he just stood there, allowing me to admire him. My fingers explored his firm buttocks, taking in every detail before I was in front of him again.

He had a smirk on his face but said nothing at first. Carter was truly a God in his own right, and truthfully, I had never seen a more beautiful man.

“I think it’s only right that I give the same treatment.” His voice was husky and raw as he said the words, and my breath hitched as I awaited his touch.

His hands found the straps of my silk nightgown. I held his gaze as he peeled them from my shoulders and watched as the fabric shimmied to my ankles. I swallowed hard as Carter’s eyes went along with it, his eyes taking in my hardened nipples. His gaze traveled lower to my belly, lingering there before a faint smile crossed his lips. I couldn’t help my own smile but almost caved when his fingers finally touched me. A single finger circled my nipples before he slid it across the other. Shivers ran down my spine as his hand began to bathe my flesh as if binding it to memory.

“Your skin is so soft,” he said. “So perfect.” He caressed the flare of my hips, moving straight around my ass before he pulled me into him. I gasped as my skin met his, his cock crushed against my stomach with his precum seeping into my skin. Carter’s hands trailed up my back before he paused at the nape of my neck, forcing me to pry my neck up to him.

My open mouth was an opportunity for him to claim it because, in the next second, I was tasting his hungry mouth, sucking on his sweet tongue as fire consumed my body. I moaned as I kissed him, my nipples becoming harder at his touch.

Carter’s hands found my ass as he pulled me into his arms. I wrapped my legs around his narrow waist, latching my hands around his neck as I tried to show him all I felt within one kiss. He then turned, and I fell to the bed with him hovering over me. We broke from our kiss for a brief second but found our way back within a second. I sucked on his tongue and could feel myself pooling between my legs. Carter was right there with his cock brushing my sex in a tease that almost drove me mad. My mind was reeling, I was on fire,

and all I needed was him inside me. It was that simple.

“Carter, please… I want you so much,” I whispered against his mouth. He stared down at me, his hair framing his face while the sun coming through the window highlighted every strand.

I felt his cock at my entrance and held my breath as the hard head teased me, causing me to spread my legs even further apart. My mouth slowly parted as he entered me, inch by inch. I closed my eyes to bask in the bliss.

“Look at me,” he demanded brusquely.

My heart was about to jump out of my chest as I opened my eyes to his. A single vein was popping in his forehead as he took his time entering me. “Oh, oh God,” I mewled, reaching for his face to caress it as he caressed my pussy with his cock.

I could feel my sensitive flesh parting to accommodate him, every single nerve in my body on high alert as pleasure flowed through my body. I knew I was soaking because, despite his size, he was sliding effortlessly inside me. The feeling was almost overwhelming as I stared into his eyes while he made love to me – it was something I had never considered would be so intense.

Carter lowered his lips to mine as he kissed me while he slowly started to move inside me. I moaned against his mouth as he released every inch inside me before pulling back to go again. My flesh hugged his, and I started lifting my hips to experience the feeling of having him deep inside me. He sucked on my lips and nipped my flesh with his teeth as he filled me with slow, agonizing thrusts that made me feel like losing my mind.

“Oh, Carter… please fuck me harder. I’m about to lose my mind,” I whimpered as he paused and looked down at me.

“Won’t it…I don’t want to hurt you or the baby,” his forehead wrinkled in confusion.

I caressed his cheeks and smiled. “I promise you won’t,” I said to him.

He kissed me yet again and eased up on his knees, and pulled me up a little by my ass. He entered me with a single stroke that had my mouth falling open. He then started to move inside me with long and hard strokes that had my tits jiggling in my chest. I gasped and bit my lips, stretching to reach his chest, which was out of reach. But

then he leaned into me, his cock sinking keeper as he kissed me yet again and began to slam into me. I gasped against his mouth and tied my hands around his neck, keeping him in place.

My pussy tightened, a small quiver racking my body as he moved from my mouth to suckle on my neck, still moving inside me. I arched my neck, closed my eyes and hung to Carter, my nails scraping his flesh as I floated in pleasure. My hands slid from his sweaty back to his ass, pressing him deeper into me as shockwaves started to flow through my body.

I opened my mouth to speak, but a scream came out instead. My pussy started to clench around him, every stroke becoming better – more intense. Too good. I couldn't hold back. I started to quiver, all my nerves on end as I orgasmed.

Carter's body slid against mine as he looked down at me and licked across my mouth. "I love you so much," he said between breaths before he bucked inside me, and the warmth of his seed filled me.

I lay there in complete bliss as my body reached new horizons and came back down. Every touch after my orgasm made me sensitive, and I couldn't help my shiver every now and then. But even after Carter pulled out, he slid down my body and kissed my stomach, which rose and fell from my heavy breaths. He kissed my skin, and I could feel it all the way in my stomach.

Epilogue

“Are you sure you want to do this, Mar?” I asked as I paused my packing to get her reaction.

“I’m positive, Anna; you don’t have to worry about me regretting my decision further down the line,” she smiled. “And plus, you know I never really liked the city, to begin with.”

I smiled as I resumed the task at hand. “Well, I’m happy I’m going to have my best friend with me every step of the way.”

She grinned. “Me too. Jason is beyond excited too. He has so many ideas for Greenvale,” she said, referring to her fiancé.

“I’m happy.”

Maria moved toward me and hugged me. “I’m really proud of you, you know.”

“Aww, thank you.”

“You and Carter have come really far. He’s basically famous for his recipes, and now that you’ll be moving back to Greenvale, I’m sure it’ll attract many tourists, which will be good for Jason’s resort,” she geeked, rubbing her hands together in excitement as she suppressed a squeal.

“Exactly. It’ll be perfect.”

“Where are they, anyway? Our flight is in two hours.”

“Carter went to get some diaper cream for Joshua. They should be back any minute now.”

We continued to chat for a few more minutes until the door flew open when Carter bustled through with baby Joshua on his side. As soon as she saw me, he gave me a toothy smile, and I couldn’t help the joy that bubbled up inside me at the precious sight. I moved toward them and kissed Carter before I took the baby and ruffled his silky blonde hair.

“I hope we didn’t keep you guys waiting too long,” Carter said as he looked between me and Maria.

“You’re just in time. We should get going soon,” Maria said as she pulled up a bag and fished out her phone from her pockets. “I’m gonna call Jason and see where he’s at. He should be there before us.”

“Ok, I’m gonna get Joshua into some fresh clothes and then we’re all set,” I said as I moved to the bedroom to do just that. Carter followed behind me and claimed my mouth as soon as I placed the baby on the bed.

I moaned against him, feeling the sliver of desire that coursed through me when his lips touched mine. Nothing had changed; Carter could still manage to get me all aroused with one kiss, and I had the same effect on him. His hands crept down my ass and held it in a gentle squeeze as he deepened the kiss. I moaned and tore my lips away from his, laughing lightly.

“Remember, we have company.”

He groaned and pulled me in to nuzzle my neck. “I missed you so much,” he said, and I almost shivered from his hot breath on my skin.

“I missed you too, but we’ve gotta go, or else we’ll miss our flight,” I warned.

“Yeah, I can’t believe we’re moving back to Greenvale,” he said.

“Are you happy?” I asked.

“I am. As much as I loved the city, it’s nice to be back. It’s been a year and a half,” he said as he smiled at me. “The big question is, are you happy?”

“I am. I love that I can go back and do what my father couldn’t, which is to make it a better place.”

Carter smiled at me and pulled me in for another kiss. “That’s my girl. I love you; have I told you that lately?” he asked as he smiled down at me.

I made a face. “Um, maybe not as often. A few hours is a long time,” I grinned.

He chuckled. “Well, I love you.”

“I love you too, babe. Now let’s go; we have a plane to catch.”

***

Being back at Greenvale always brought back memories, but it was safe to say this time was different. There was no bitterness – just an abundance of love I could feel around me. I had my family and friends who had grown to become just as close – here to make a difference

with me.

It wasn't like this was the first time I'd been back since I left Carter here. We came back five months after getting married when Maria came to us with the idea of transforming Greenvale. Of course, Carter hopped on to the idea, and the more we spoke of our plans, the more we were willing to make them a reality.

Carter still had his bar and was planning to expand in the near future while he worked the first year at Jason's resort, which had spiked up the employment rate in the area. It was the talk of the town, and everyone was eager for the official grand opening, which was to take place in a few days.

Carter had made a name for himself in the city and created a reputation that wasn't limited to New York, and everyone was excited about his next move.

There were new developments in Greenvale and that was clear as day when we landed and began to drive to the cabin after dropping off Maria and Jason at the resort.

"Can you believe that one year has made such a vast difference?" I said in amazement as I looked out the window.

"Yeah, that's a lot of time. I fell in love with you in less than a week, and look how much difference that made," Carter said, and I turned to him with a smile.

"That's a very good point." I kissed him lightly on the lips while Joshua shuffled around in the middle.

I sighed when we arrived at the cabin and couldn't help my smile as I feasted my eyes on the beauty. We had expanded a bit and incorporated the rustic cabin look with a bit of a modern vibe. The windows had been replaced with large, floor-to-ceiling ones that added a lot of natural light to the house. Superb for the content creation I would do at home while still keeping in touch with nature. It had been a lot as we didn't want to change the whole thing. We wanted what Patrick had to remain but still wanted it bigger for our family.

It was perfect, and now that it was summer, everything seemed lush and bright with the glow of the sun, which just made everything better. Carter came up behind me as I gazed at the beauty ahead of us and wrapped his hands around my shoulder.

“Well, When Hendricks told us that Patrick had left the house to us, I never imagined this would be the outcome,” he said as he smiled at me.

I grinned. “Nothing we have now ever crossed my mind a year and a half ago,” I admitted.

“But I’m glad we crossed paths again. I can’t imagine my life without you in it, Anna.”

His words were soft as he looked deep within my soul and said the words to me. I felt it deep inside my heart and felt a burst of emotions overwhelm me. My eyes got foggy as tears began to pool in them. Carter reached for me and kissed me hard, wanting to seal it all with a toe-curling kiss.

This was home.

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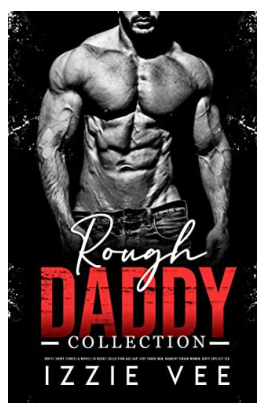

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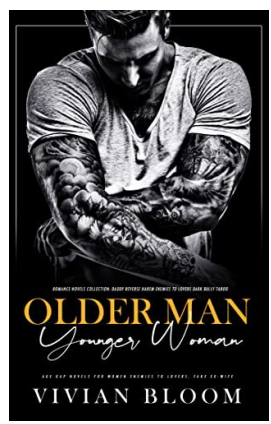

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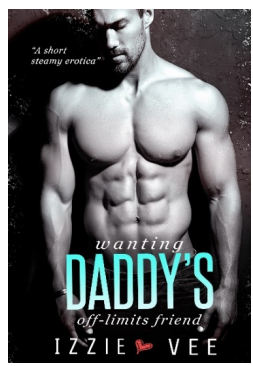

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SAMPLE

I couldn't believe that I was about to head off to college and never had a sexual experience in my life. The person I considered my boyfriend in my senior years of high school was initially the person I thought I would take the big step with but later found that he only had one intention in mind, and that was to fuck the only girl in our year who was rumored to still be a virgin – me. It had hurt, and I had broken off the relationship with a few heated words thrown at him but later realized there wasn't much I wanted out of the relationship either rather than sex.

I didn't want to be a virgin anymore, so I picked the boy that had given me the most attention and decided that he was the one. Unfortunately, he wasn't and here I was, about to head off to college with my hymen intact.

If it were only based on desire alone, then my dream guy would be the one who came over to my house every now and then with all his

charm and kindness. He was the first crush I ever had, but I knew there was nothing I could make of the relationship considering he was my father's best friend.

Connor was everything I wanted in a man; he was sweet, kind, caring, incredibly handsome, and packing for his age. He taught gym at the college that I was accepted into, which made my excitement all the more profound. Dad said that Connor would be there to look out for me as he had always done, and I … ***To continue reading get your FREE DOWNLOAD HERE.***